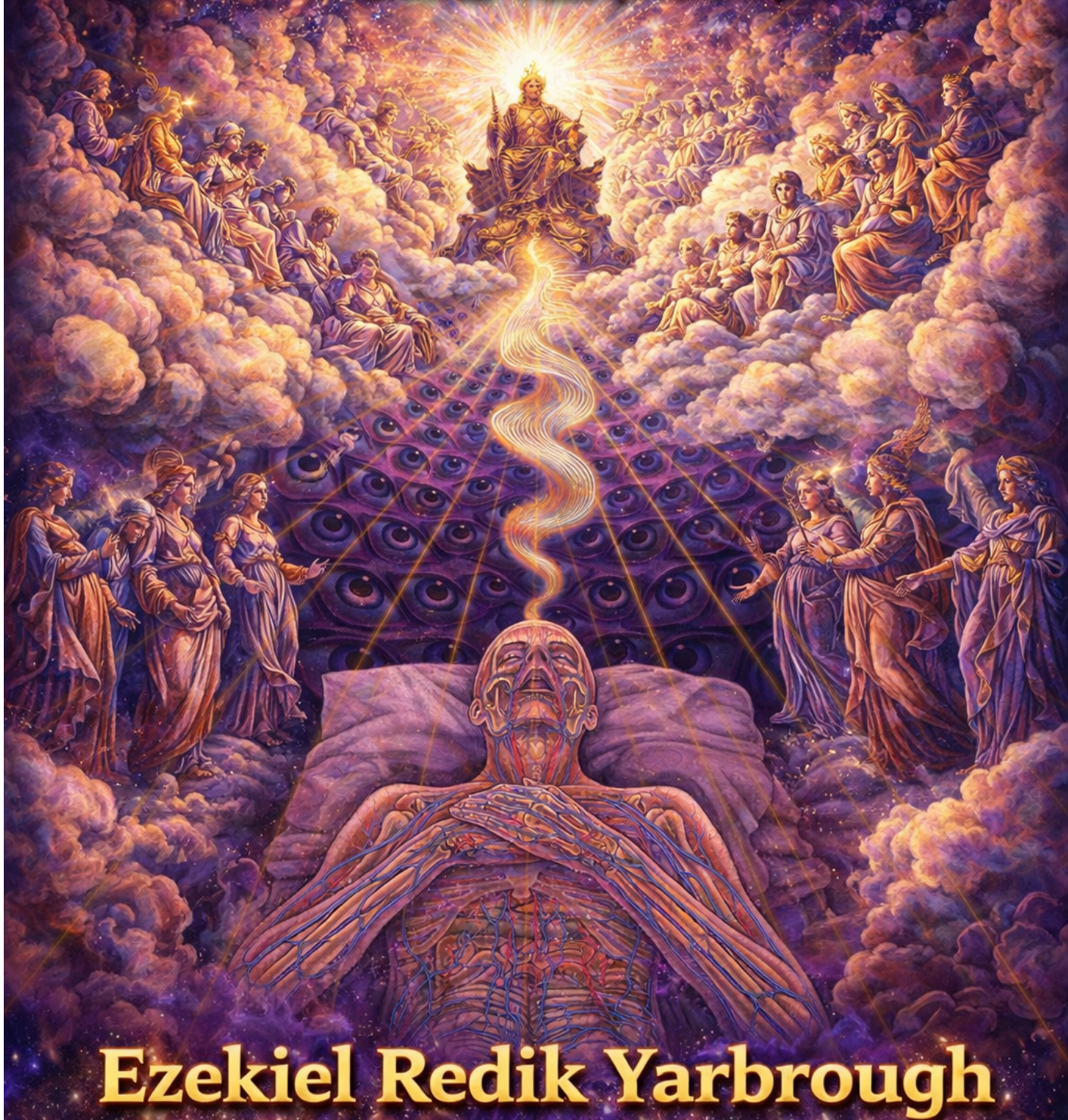


ARCHIVUM OBSCURUM –
→ ECHOES EX FORUMIS ←
→ PROJECT ANGELBOOK ←
VOLUME VIII (PART 6)



Ezekiel Redik Yarbrough

Archivum Obscurum – Echoes
Ex Forumis – Project
AngelBook Volume VIII (Part 6)
By Ezekiel Redik Yarbrough -
(DBM ECLIPZE)

Introduction

What you hold in your hands is not a book in the traditional sense—it is an **accidental grimoire**, born from the forgotten corners of the Internet. These volumes are built from **Google searches**, **Wikipedia trails**, and **archive-dredged threads**, many of which were suggested or whispered to me by anonymous voices across **/x/**, **4plebs**, and **dark web message boards**. I did not invent this content—I excavated it. I followed every recommended link, every screenshot, every schizo red-string rant, and pulled it into the light. What emerged wasn't just data—it was **pattern**, **presence**, and **power**. This is the **collective unconscious of the Internet**, filtered, sorted, and bound into scripture. These are the **digital Dead Sea Scrolls** of the forgotten occult, the haunted edges of algorithmic prophecy. Welcome to the Archivum Obscurum.

distinctively German quality to it. This is because the idiosyncratic reception of Darwin in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany resulted in the integration of Darwin's ideas with German embryological and developmental traditions formulated by the Naturphilosophen and theorists such as Ernst Haeckel. These traditions formed the intellectual background of Jung's evolutionary thought.[125]

The result was that Jung's evolutionary conception of mind focused on embryology and development. From this perspective, the emergence of consciousness both in ontogeny (development) and phylogeny (evolution) was built upon much more archaic, affect-based subcortical brain systems. This developmental approach to evolution underpinned his "archaeological" conception of the human psyche, consisting of different evolutionary layers, from the deeply archaic to the more evolutionarily recent. Those more archaic structures in the brain, Jung believed to be the basis of the "collective unconscious"—an aspect of human psychology shared by all members of the species *Homo sapiens*. [126]

In commenting on humanity's evolution from an ancient primate ancestor, Jung wrote: "We keep forgetting that we are primates and that we have to make allowances for these primitive layers in our psyche." [127] Jung also developed the notion of different evolutionary layers in the psyche in his discussion of fossil hominins such as *Pithecanthropus* (*Homo erectus*). As he writes:

For just as a man has a body that is no different in principle from that of an animal, so also his psychology has a whole series of lower storeys [sic] in which the spectres from humanity's past epochs still dwell, then the animal souls from the age of *Pithecanthropus* and the hominids, then the "psyche" of the cold-blooded saurian. [128]

Jung's notion of different evolutionary layers in the human mind has been compared with the work of neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, particularly as outlined in his book *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions*. [3] Of these affinities it has been suggested that 'Jung and Panksepp have, independently it seems, developed similar metaphors of an archeologically layered psyche in which jewels and treasures are discoverable in the deepest phylogenetically ancient regions of the brain – for Jung they are archetypal structures for Panksepp cross-species homologies.' [3]

Significantly, in a 2017 article entitled "The Affective Core of the Self: A Neuro-Archetypal Perspective on the Foundations of Human (and Animal) Subjectivity", when noting Jung's belief that archetypes may be related to evolutionarily ancient subcortical brain systems, Panksepp and colleagues wrote that "such assertions by Jung were not only quite farsighted, but they actually open ways to connect his theory of the psyche with the most advanced scientific theories and discoveries of our day." [129]

Spirituality

Further information: Jungian interpretation of religion

Part of a series on

Esotericism
Esoteric symbolism
Key concepts
Rites
Societies
Notable figures
Related topics
vte

Jung's work on himself and his patients convinced him that life has a spiritual purpose beyond material goals.[130][131] The main task for people, he believed, is to discover and fulfill their deep, innate potential. Based on his study of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Taoism, and other traditions, Jung believed this journey of transformation, which he called individuation, is at the mystical heart of all religions. It is a journey to meet the self and at the same time to meet the Divine.[132] Unlike Freud's atheistic worldview, Jung's pantheism may have led him to believe that spiritual experience was essential to well-being, as he specifically identifies individual human life with the universe as a whole.[133][134]

In 1959, Jung was asked by the host, John Freeman, on the BBC interview program *Face to Face* whether he believed in God, to which Jung answered, "I do not need to believe. I know." [135][136] Jung's ideas on religion counterbalance Freudian skepticism. Jung's idea of religion as a practical road to individuation is still treated in modern textbooks on the psychology of religion, though his ideas have been criticized.[137]

Jung recommended spirituality as a cure for alcoholism, and is considered to have had an indirect role in establishing Alcoholics Anonymous.[138] Jung treated an American patient named Rowland Hazard III who had chronic alcoholism. After working with the patient for some time and achieving no significant progress, Jung told the man that his alcoholic condition was near hopeless, save only the possibility of a spiritual experience. Jung noted that, occasionally, such experiences had been known to reform alcoholics when all other options had failed. Hazard took Jung's advice seriously and sought a personal, spiritual experience. He returned to the United States and joined a Christian evangelical movement known as the Oxford Group. He told other alcoholics what Jung had told him about the importance of a spiritual experience. One of the alcoholics he brought into the Oxford Group was Ebby Thacher, a long-time friend and drinking buddy of William Griffith Wilson, later co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Thacher told Wilson about the Oxford Group, and through them, Wilson became aware of Hazard's experience with Jung. The influence of Jung thus indirectly found its way into the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous, the original twelve-step program.

The above claims are documented in the letters of Jung and Wilson.[139] Although some historians dispute the detail, Jung discussed an Oxford Group member, who may have been the same person, in talks around 1940. The remarks were distributed privately in transcript form, from shorthand taken by an attender (Jung reportedly approved the transcript), and later recorded in his *Collected Works*, "For instance, when

a member of the Oxford Group comes to me in order to get treatment, I say, 'You are in the Oxford Group; so long as you are there, you settle your affair with the Oxford Group. I can't do it better than Jesus.'"[140] Jung goes on to state he has seen similar cures among Roman Catholics. The 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous has a psychological backdrop involving the human ego and the dichotomy between the conscious and unconscious mind.[141]

Inquiries into the paranormal

Jung had an apparent interest in the paranormal and occult. For decades, he attended seances and claimed to have witnessed "parapsychic phenomena". Initially, he attributed these to psychological causes, even delivering a 1919 lecture in England for the Society for Psychical Research on "The Psychological Foundations for the belief in spirits".[142] However, he began to "doubt whether an exclusively psychological approach can do justice to the phenomena in question"[142] and stated that "the spirit hypothesis yields better results".[143]. Still, he retained some skepticism toward his own postulation, as he could not find material evidence of the existence of spirits.[143]

Jung's ideas about the paranormal culminated in "synchronicity".[144] This is the idea that certain coincidences manifest in the world, have exceptionally intense meaning to observers. Such coincidences have a great effect on the observer from multiple cumulative aspects: from the immediate personal relevance of the coincidence to the observer, from the peculiarities of (the nature of, the character, novelty, curiosity of) any such coincidence; from the sheer improbability of the coincidence, having no apparent causal link (hence Jung's essay subtitle "An Acausal Connecting Principle"). Despite his own experiments failing to confirm the phenomenon[145] he held on to the idea as an explanation for apparent ESP.[146] In addition, he proposed it as a functional explanation for how the I-Ching worked. However, he was never clear about how synchronicity worked.[147]

Interpretation of quantum mechanics

Jung influenced one philosophical interpretation (not the science) of quantum physics with the concept of synchronicity regarding some events as non-causal. That idea influenced the physicist Wolfgang Pauli (with whom, via a letter correspondence, Jung developed the notion of *unus mundus* in connection with the idea of nonlocality) and some other physicists.[148]

Alchemy

The mythic alchemical philosopher's stone as pictured in Atalanta Fugiens Emblem 21
Jung's acquaintance with alchemy came between 1928 and 1930 when he was introduced to a manuscript of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, translated by Richard Wilhelm.[149] The work and writings of Jung from the 1930s onwards shifted to a focus on the psychological significance of alchemy.[150]

In 1944, Jung published *Psychology and Alchemy*, in which he analyzed the alchemical

symbols and came to the conclusion that there is a direct relationship between them and the psychoanalytical process.[e] He argued that the alchemical process was the transformation of the impure soul (lead) to perfected soul (gold), and a metaphor for the individuation process.[31]

In 1963, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* first appeared in English as part of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. *Mysterium Coniunctionis* was Jung's last major book and focused on the "Mysterium Coniunctionis" archetype, known as the sacred marriage between the sun and moon. Jung argued that the stages of the alchemists, the blackening, the whitening, the reddening, and the yellowing, could be taken as symbolic of individuation—his chosen term for personal growth (75).[151]

Art therapy

Further information: Art therapy

Jung proposed that art can be used to alleviate or contain feelings of trauma, fear, or anxiety and also to repair, restore, and heal.[25] In his work with patients and his own personal explorations, Jung wrote that art expression and images found in dreams could help recover from trauma and emotional distress. At times of emotional distress, he often drew, painted, or made objects and constructions, which he recognized as more than recreational.[25]

Dance/movement therapy

Dance and movement therapy, as a form of active imagination, was developed by Jung and Toni Wolff in 1916[152] and practiced by Tina Keller-Jenny and other analysts. It remained largely unknown until the 1950s when it was rediscovered by Marian Chace and therapist Mary Whitehouse. Whitehouse, after studying with Martha Graham and Mary Wigman, became a dancer and teacher of modern dance,[153] and, along with Swiss dancer Trudi Schoop, is considered one of the founders of dance/movement therapy in the U.S.

Political views

The state

Jung stressed the importance of individual rights in a person's relation to the state and society. He saw that the state was treated as "a quasi-animate personality from whom everything is expected" but that this personality was "only camouflage for those individuals who know how to manipulate it".[154] He referred to the state as a form of slavery.[155][156][157][158] He also thought that the state "swallowed up [people's] religious forces",[159] and therefore that the state had "taken the place of God"—making it comparable to a religion in which "state slavery is a form of worship".[157] Jung observed that "stage acts of [the] state" are comparable to religious displays:

Brass bands, flags, banners, parades and monster demonstrations are no different in principle from ecclesiastical processions, cannonades and fire to scare off demons.[160]

From Jung's perspective, this replacement of God with the state in a mass society leads

to the dislocation of the religious drive and results in the same fanaticism of the church-states of the Dark Ages—wherein the more the state is 'worshipped', the more freedom and morality are suppressed;[161] this ultimately leaves the individual psychically undeveloped with extreme feelings of marginalization.[162]

Service to the Allies during World War II

Jung was in contact with Allen Dulles of the Office of Strategic Services (predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency) and provided valuable intelligence on the psychological condition of Hitler. Dulles referred to Jung as "Agent 488" and offered the following description of his service: "Nobody will probably ever know how much Professor Jung contributed to the Allied Cause during the war, by seeing people who were connected somehow with the other side". Jung's service to the Allied cause through the OSS remained classified after the war.[163]

Relationship to Nazism and antisemitism

In "The State of Psychotherapy Today",[164] published in 1934 in the *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie*, Jung wrote: "The Aryan unconscious has a greater potential than the Jewish unconscious" and "The Jew, who is something of a nomad, has never yet created a cultural form of his own and as far as we can see never will".[165] Andrew Samuels argues that his remarks on the "Aryan unconscious" and the "corrosive character" of Freud's "Jewish gospel"[166] demonstrate a form of antisemitism "fundamental to the structure of Jung's thought" but also argues that there is a "pioneering nature of Jung's contributions" and that "his intuition of the importance of exploring difference remains intact." [167]

In 1933, after the Nazis gained power in Germany, Jung became the president of the new International General Medical Society for Psychotherapy (*Allgemeine Ärztliche Gesellschaft für Psychotherapie*); the professional body aimed to have affiliated organizations in different countries.[168] The German affiliated organization, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Ärztliche Gesellschaft für Psychotherapie*, led by Matthias Göring, an Adlerian psychotherapist[169] and a cousin of the prominent Nazi Hermann Göring, excluded Jews. In 1933, the society's *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie* journal published a statement endorsing Nazi positions[170] and Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*. [171] In 1934, Jung wrote in a Swiss publication, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, that he experienced "great surprise and disappointment"[172] when the *Zentralblatt* associated his name with the pro-Nazi statement. He did not end his relationship with the *Zentralblatt* at this time, but he did arrange the appointment of a new managing editor, Carl Alfred Meier of Switzerland. For the next few years, the *Zentralblatt* under Jung and Meier maintained a position distinct from that of the Nazis in that it continued to acknowledge the contributions of Jewish doctors to psychotherapy.[173] In the face of energetic German attempts to Nazify the international body, Jung resigned from its presidency in 1939, [173] the year the Second World War started.

The International Society's constitution permitted individual doctors to join it directly rather than through one of the national affiliated societies, a provision to which Jung

drew attention in a circular in 1934.[174] This implied that German Jewish doctors could maintain their professional status as individual members of the international body, even though they were excluded from the German affiliate, as well as from other German medical societies operating under the Nazis.[175] Jung said, "The main point is to get a young and insecure science into a place of safety during an earthquake." [176]

Scholar Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi believed that Jung's antisemitism may have contributed to the schism between Freud and his circle of psychoanalysts, who were predominantly Jews.[177]

Jung's interest in European mythology and folk psychology was shared by the Nazis. [178][179][68] Richard Noll describes Jung's own reaction to this connection:

Jung clearly identifies himself with the spirit of German Volkstumsbewegung throughout this period and well into the 1920s and 1930s, until the horrors of Nazism finally compelled him to reframe these neopagan metaphors in a negative light in his 1936 essay on Wotan.[180]

Various statements made by Jung in the 1930s have been cited as evidence of both contempt for Nazism and sympathy for Nazism.[181] In the 1936 essay "Wotan", Jung described the influence of Adolf Hitler on Germany as "one man who is obviously 'possessed' has infected a whole nation to such an extent that everything is set in motion and has started rolling on its course towards perdition." [182][183] He would later say, during a lengthy interview with H. R. Knickerbocker in October 1938:[184][185]

Hitler seemed like the 'double' of a real person, as if Hitler the man might be hiding inside like an appendix, and deliberately so concealed in order not to disturb the mechanism ... You know you could never talk to this man; because there is nobody there ... It is not an individual; it is an entire nation.

In an interview in 1949, Carl Jung said,

It must be clear to anyone who has read any of my books that I have never been a Nazi sympathizer and I never have been anti-Semitic, and no amount of misquotation, mistranslation, or rearrangement of what I have written can alter the record of my true point of view. Nearly every one of these passages has been tampered with, either by malice or by ignorance. Furthermore, my friendly relations with a large group of Jewish colleagues and patients over a period of many years in itself disproves the charge of anti-Semitism.[186]

Jung is also known to have possessed an interest in the Jewish mystic tradition of Kabbalah.[187]

Views on homosexuality

Jung addressed homosexuality in his published writings, in one comment specifying that

homosexuality should not be a concern of legal authorities nor be considered a crime. He also stated that homosexuality does not reduce the value of a person as a member of society. Jung also said that homosexuality is a result of psychological immaturity ("nurture"), but only if one's sexuality is not an aspect of their constitutional characteristics ("nature").[188]

Psychedelics

Jung's theories are considered to be a useful therapeutic framework for the analysis of unconscious phenomena that become manifest in the acute psychedelic state.[3][189][190][191][192] This view is based on correspondence Jung had with researchers involved in psychedelic research in the 1950s, as well as more recent neuroimaging research where subjects who are administered psychedelic compounds seem to have archetypal religious experiences of "unity" and "ego dissolution" associated with reduced activity in the default mode network.[190][191][193]

This research has led to a re-evaluation of Jung's work, particularly the visions detailed in *The Red Book*, in the context of contemporary psychedelic, evolutionary, and developmental neuroscience. For example, in a chapter entitled "Integrating the Archaic and the Modern: The Red Book, Visual Cognitive Modalities and the Neuroscience of Altered States of Consciousness", in the 2020 volume *Jung's Red Book for Our Time: Searching for Soul Under Postmodern Conditions*, Volume 4, it is argued Jung was a pioneer who explored uncharted "cognitive domains" that are alien to Western modes of thought. While such domains of experience are not part of mainstream Western culture and thought, they are central to various Indigenous cultures that use psychedelics such as Iboga and Ayahuasca during rituals to alter consciousness. The author writes: "Jung seems to have been dealing with modes of consciousness alien to mainstream Western thought, exploring the terrain of uncharted cognitive domains. I argue that science is beginning to catch up with Jung who was a pioneer whose insights contribute a great deal to our emerging understanding of human consciousness." [194] In this analysis, Jung's paintings of his visions in *The Red Book* were compared to the paintings of Ayahuasca visions by the Peruvian shaman Pablo Amaringo.[195]

Commenting on research that was being undertaken during the 1950s, Jung wrote the following in a letter to Betty Eisner, a psychologist who was involved in LSD research at the University of California: "Experiments along the line of mescaline and related drugs are certainly most interesting since such drugs lay bare a level of the unconscious that is otherwise accessible only under peculiar psychic conditions. It is a fact that you get certain perceptions and experiences of things appearing either in mystical states or in the analysis of unconscious phenomena." [196]

An account of Jung and psychedelics, as well as the importance of Jungian psychology to psychedelic-assisted therapies, is outlined in Scott Hill's 2013 book *Confrontation with the Unconscious: Jungian Depth Psychology and Psychedelic Experience*. [197] A 2021 article discusses Jung's attitude towards psychedelics, as well as the applicability of his ideas to current research.[193] As the author writes, Jung's "...legitimate reservations

about the clinical use of psychedelics are no longer relevant as the field has progressed significantly, devising robust clinical and experimental protocols for psychedelic-assisted therapies. That said Jung's concept of individuation—that is the integration of the archaic unconscious with consciousness—seems extremely pertinent to modern psychedelic research." [193] The author also uses work in evolutionary and psychedelic neuroscience, and specifically the latter's ability to make manifest ancient subcortical brain systems, to illuminate Jung's concept of an archaic collective unconscious that evolved before the ego complex and the uniquely human default mode network. [193]

Legacy

The Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a psychometric instrument mostly popular with non-psychologists, as well as the concepts of socionics, were developed from Jung's model of psychological types. The MBTI is considered pseudoscience [198] and is not widely accepted by researchers in the field of psychology. [199]

Jung is considered a "godparent" of the altruistic, mutual self-help movement, Alcoholics Anonymous. [200] Jung told Rhode Island businessman and politician Rowland Hazard III, who had come under his care for the first time in 1926, that the only chance he might have to recover was through a "spiritual or religious experience" or "genuine conversion," which Hazard later had, through the Oxford Group and the Emmanuel Movement, and, according to some sources, never drank again. [201]

Hazard, in turn, helped Ebby Thatcher, another alcoholic, get sober, with help from the Oxford Group. Thatcher brought Jung's ideas to a third alcoholic, Bill W., who consequently co-founded Alcoholics Anonymous with Dr. Bob. Years later, Bill W. corresponded with Jung, in 1961, thanking him for helping to inspire the organization. Of Hazard, the alcoholic who came under his care, Jung wrote: "His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God." [200]

Jung concludes his letter to Bill W.:

"You see, "alcohol" in Latin is spiritus, and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum." [202]

Jung saw the human psyche as "by nature religious" and made this idea a principal focus of his explorations. Jung is one of the best-known contemporary contributors to dream analysis and symbolization. His influence on popular psychology, the "psychologization of religion", spirituality, and the New Age movement has been immense. A Review of General Psychology survey, published in 2002, ranked Jung as the 23rd most cited psychologist of the 20th century. The list however focused on U.S. journals and was made by the psychology department of Arkansas State University. [203]

Although psychoanalysis is still studied in the humanities, a 2008 study in *The Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* found that psychology departments and textbooks treat it as "desiccated and dead".[204] Similarly, Alan Stone noted, "As academic psychology becomes more 'scientific' and psychiatry more biological, psychoanalysis is being brushed aside." [205]

In popular culture

Literature

Books in which Jung is a character in the narrative

Laurens van der Post was an Afrikaner author who claimed to have had a 16-year friendship with Jung, from which books and a film were created about Jung.[206] The accuracy of van der Post's claims about his relationship to Jung has been questioned. [207]

In his novel *The World is Made of Glass* (1983), Morris West gives a fictional account of one of Jung's cases, placing the events in 1913.[208] According to the author's note, the novel is "based upon a case recorded, very briefly, by Carl Gustav Jung in his autobiographical work *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*".

Pilgrim, a supernatural novel in which Jung is a character.

Possessing the Secret of Joy, a novel in which Jung is a therapist character.

The Interpretation of Murder, a novel focused on Sigmund Freud in which he solves a murder in New York City.

Fiction that references Jung's theories

Hermann Hesse, author of works such as *Siddhartha* and *Steppenwolf*, was treated by Joseph Lang, a student of Jung. For Hesse this began a long preoccupation with psychoanalysis, through which he came to know Jung personally.[209]

The Canadian novelist Robertson Davies made Jungian analysis a central part of his 1970 novel *The Manticore*. He stated in a letter, "There have been other books which describe Freudian analyses, but I know of no other that describes a Jungian analysis" adding "I was deeply afraid that I would put my foot in it, for I have never undergone one of those barnacle-scraping experiences, and knew of it only through reading. So, I was greatly pleased when some of my Jungian friends in Zurich liked it very much." [210]

The psychological novel *E.E.* written by Olga Tokarczuk draws from Jung's doctoral dissertation *On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena*. [211] Jung is not a character in this story, but Jung's views on the occult are extensively cited.

Art

Original statue of Jung in Mathew Street, Liverpool, a half-body on a plinth captioned "Liverpool is the pool of life"

The visionary Swiss painter Peter Birkhäuser was treated by a student of Jung, Marie-Louise von Franz, and corresponded with Jung about the translation of dream symbolism into works of art.[212]

American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock underwent Jungian psychotherapy in 1939 with Joseph Henderson. Henderson engaged Pollock through his art, having him make drawings, which led to the appearance of many Jungian concepts in his paintings. [213][214]

Contrary to some sources,[215] Jung did not visit Liverpool but recorded a dream in which he did, and of which he wrote, "Liverpool is the pool of life, it makes to live." A plaster statue of Jung was erected in Mathew Street in 1987 that was vandalised and replaced by a more durable version in 1993.[216]

Music

Musician David Bowie described himself as Jungian in his relationship to dreams and the unconscious.[217] Bowie sang of Jung on his album *Aladdin Sane* (a pun on "a lad insane") and attended the exhibition of *The Red Book* in New York with artist Tony Oursler, who described Bowie as "reading and speaking of the psychoanalyst with passion".[217] Bowie's 1967 song "Shadow Man" encapsulates a key Jungian concept, while in 1987 Bowie described the *Glass Spiders* of *Never Let Me Down* as Jungian mother figures around which he not only anchored a worldwide tour but also created an enormous onstage effigy.[217]

British rock band the Police released an album titled *Synchronicity* in 1983.

The American rock band Tool was influenced by Jungian concepts in its album *Ænima*, the title a play on the concepts of *anima* and *animus*. In the song "Forty Six & 2", the singer seeks to become a more evolved self by exploring and overcoming his Shadow.[218]

Argentinian musician Luis Alberto Spinetta was influenced by Jung's texts in his 1975 conceptual album *Durazno sangrando*, specifically the songs "Encadenado al ánima" and "En una lejana playa del ánimos", which deal with *anima* and *animus*. [219]

Jung appeared on the front cover of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. [220]

He is referenced in The Streets song the "Irony of it All" from the album *Original Pirate Material*. [221][222]

The South Korean band BTS's 2019 album *Map of the Soul: Persona* is based on Jung's *Map of the Soul*, which gives the basic principles of Jung's analytical psychology.[223] It includes an intro song titled "Persona" rapped by group leader RM, who asks, "who am I?", and is confronted with various versions of himself with the words "persona", "shadow", and "ego", referring to Jung's theories.[224] On 21 February 2020, the band released *Map of the Soul: 7*, which specifically focuses on Jung's "shadow" and "ego" theories. As part of the first phase of the band's comeback, "Interlude: Shadow", rapped by Suga and released on 10 January,[225] addresses the shadows and the darkness that go hand-in-hand with the light and attention shone on celebrities.[226] The next comeback trailer, "Outro: Ego", performed by J-Hope,[227] ends with his declaration of self and ego as he appears within a colourful city "in which the artist's current image is projected".[228]

In 2019, Italian rapper Marracash released the album *Persona*, which features many Jungian themes.

Jung appeared on the cover art of the 2008 single "Metanoia" by American psychedelic rock band MGMT.

Composer John Zorn released his composition *Liber Novus* inspired by Jung's *Red Book* in 2010 on the *Tzadik CD Dictée/Liber Novus*.

Theatre, film, television and radio

Films in which Jung is a character in the narrative

2002 saw the release of an Italian film about Jung and Spielrein *The Soul Keeper* (*Prendimi l'Anima*) directed by Roberto Faenza. It used English dialogue and English actors, but was never formally released in the United States. Emilia Fox played Sabina Spielrein and Iain Glen was Carl Gustav Jung.

A Dangerous Method, a 2011 film directed by David Cronenberg, is a fictional dramatisation of the lives of Freud, Jung, and Sabina Spielrein between 1904 and 1913. Spielrein is the Russian woman who became Jung's lover and student and, later, an analyst herself.[229] Michael Fassbender plays Carl Jung. The film is based on the stage play *The Talking Cure* by Christopher Hampton which was in turn based on the 1993 non-fiction book by John Kerr, *A Most Dangerous Method: The Story of Jung, Freud, and Sabina Spielrein*.

In the online animated series, *Super Science Friends*, Jung, voiced by Tom Park, is featured as one of the recurrent antagonists against Sigmund Freud.[230]

Soul, a 2020 Pixar film written by Pete Docter, Mike Jones and Kemp Powers, includes brief appearances of Jung as an ethereal cartoon character, "Soul Carl Jung".[231]

Jeff Lillico portrays Jung in episode 13 of season 15 "Murdoch on the Couch" (10 January 2022) of the Canadian television period detective series *Murdoch Mysteries*. [232]

Documentaries

The BBC interviewed Jung for *Face to Face* with John Freeman at Jung's home in Zurich in 1959.[135]

Stephen Segaller produced a documentary on Jung as part of his "World of Dreams", *Wisdom of the Dream* in 1985. It was re-issued in 2018.[233] It was followed by a book of the same title.[234]

Matter of Heart (1986) is a documentary about Jung featuring interviews with those who knew him and archival footage.[235]

On 2 December 2004, BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time* broadcast a program on "the mind and theories" of Jung.[236]

Film, stage, and television influenced by Jung's ideas

Federico Fellini brought to the screen exuberant imagery shaped by his encounter with Jung's ideas, especially Jungian dream interpretation. Fellini preferred Jung to Freud because Jungian analysis defined the dream not as a symptom of a disease that required a cure but rather as a link to archetypal images shared by all of humanity.[237]

Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket* has an underlying theme about the duality of man. In one scene, a colonel asks a soldier, "You write 'Born to Kill' on your helmet and you wear a peace button. What's that supposed to be, some kind of sick joke?" The soldier replies, "I think I was trying to suggest something about the duality of man, sir...the Jungian thing, sir." [238]

In the 1994 *Frasier* episode, "Frasier Crane's Day Off", Niles fills in for his brother, declaring: "Although I feel perfectly qualified to fill Frasier's radio shoes, I should warn you that while Frasier is a Freudian, I am a Jungian. So there'll be no blaming Mother today."

Robert Eggers's 2019 psychological thriller *The Lighthouse* has elements strongly influenced by Jung's work, with Eggers hoping that "it's a movie where both Jung and Freud would be furiously eating their popcorn".[239]

Video games

The Persona series of games is heavily based on Jung's theories, representing the shadow, the persona, and archetype.[240]

The Nights into Dreams series of games is heavily based on Jung's theories.[241]

Jungian concepts are present in the Xeno series, including Xenogears; its reimagination as the Xenosaga trilogy; and a graphic novel, Perfect Works, published by the game's creator.[citation needed]

The game Control is heavily influenced by Carl Jung's ideas, particularly synchronicity and shadow selves.[242][better source needed][243]

Alan Wake takes inspiration from Carl Jung's ideas of archetype and individuation.[244]

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Books

1910 Conflicts in the Child's Soul[f]

1912 Psychology of the Unconscious

1916 Seven Sermons to the Dead (a part of the Red Book, published privately)

1921 Psychological Types

1933 Modern Man in Search of a Soul (essays)

1944 Psychology and Alchemy

1951 Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self

1952 Symbols of Transformation (revised edition of Psychology of the Unconscious)

1954 Answer to Job

1956 Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy

1957 The Undiscovered Self

1959 Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies (Translated by R. F. C. Hull)

1960 Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle

1962 Memories, Dreams, Reflections (autobiography, co-written with Aniela Jaffé)

1964 Man and His Symbols (Jung contributed one part, his last writing before his death in 1961; the other four parts are by Marie-Louise von Franz, Joseph L. Henderson, Jaffé, and Jolande Jacobi)

2009 The Red Book: Liber Novus (manuscript produced c. 1915–1932)

2020 Black Books (private journals produced c. 1913–1932, on which the Red Book is based)

Collected Works

Main article: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung

Editors: Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler. Executive ed.: W. McGuire.

Trans.: R.F.C. Hull. London: Routledge Kegan Paul (1953–1980).

1. Psychiatric Studies (1902–1906)
2. Experimental Researches (1904–1910) (trans L. Stein and D. Riviere)
3. Psychogenesis of Mental Disease (1907–1914; 1919–1958)
4. Freud and Psychoanalysis (1906–1914; 1916–1930)
5. Symbols of Transformation (1911–12; 1952)

6. Psychological Types (1921)
 7. Two Essays on Analytical Psychology (1912–1928)
 8. Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche (1916–1952)
 - 9.1 Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (1934–1955)
 - 9.2 Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self (1951)
 10. Civilization in Transition (1918–1959)
 11. Psychology and Religion: West and East (1932–1952)
 12. Psychology and Alchemy (1936–1944)
 13. Alchemical Studies (1919–1945):
 14. Mysterium Coniunctionis (1955–56):
 15. Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature (1929–1941)
 16. The Practice of Psychotherapy (1921–1925)
 17. The Development of Personality (1910; 1925–1943)
 18. The Symbolic Life: Miscellaneous Writings
 19. General Bibliography
 20. General Index
- Supplementary volumes

- A. The Zofingia Lectures
 - B. Psychology of the Unconscious (trans. Beatrice M. Hinckle)
- Seminars

Analytical Psychology (1925)
Dream Analysis (1928–1930)[245]
Visions (1930–34)
The Kundalini Yoga (1932)
Nietzsche's Zarathustra (1934–1939)
Children's Dreams (1936–1940)
See also
Houses and institutions

C. G. Jung House Museum
Bollingen Tower
Psychology Club Zürich
C. G. Jung Institute, Zürich
Society of Analytical Psychology
Organizations

International Association for Analytical Psychology
International Association for Jungian Studies
Notes

Jung's identification as a "psychoanalyst" was temporary (Quote: "Between the years 1907 and 1912, when Jung was a psycho-analyst").[4] Following Freud's exclusive definition of the term, Jung stopped referring to his practice as "psycho-analysis". He resigned as president of the International Psychoanalytical Association and later was

characterized as an "analytical psychologist".[5]

Earlier in his career, Jung was also friends with both Freud and Adler, developing a strong relationship with the first, and eventually breaking it over psychological divergences with both him and the latter.

As a university student Jung changed the modernized spelling of Karl to the original family form of Carl. Bair, Deirdre (2003). *Jung: A Biography*. New York: Back Bay Books. pp. 7, 53. ISBN 978-0-316-15938-8.

Also see other general concepts of 'motif' covering visual arts, narrative, et cetera.

'For Jung, alchemy is not only part of the pre-history of chemistry, that is, not only laboratory work, but also an essential part of the history of psychology as the history of the discovery of the deep structure of the psyche and its unconscious. Jung emphasized the significance of the symbolic structure of alchemical texts, a structure that is understood as a way independent of laboratory research, as a structure per se.' Calian, George Florin (2010). *Alkimia Operativa and Alkimia Speculativa. Some Modern Controversies on the Historiography of Alchemy*. Budapest: Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU. pp. 167–168.

This work is also cited by Jung himself as "Psychic Conflicts in a Child". See, for example, *Symbols of Transformation* pg. 23 and 249.

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"When I visited the ancient pagoda at Turukalukundram [sic], southern India, a local pundit explained to me that the old temples were purposely covered on the outside, from top to bottom, with obscene sculptures, to remind ordinary people of their sexuality. The spirit, he said, was a great danger because Yama, the god of death, would instantly carry off these people (the "imperfecti") if they trod the spiritual path directly, without preparation. The erotic sculptures were meant to remind them of their dharma (law), which bids them fulfil their ordinary lives. Only when they have fulfilled their dharma can they tread the spiritual path. The obscenities were intended to arouse the erotic curiosity of visitors to the temples so that they should not forget their dharma; otherwise, they would not fulfil it. Only the man who was qualified by his karma (the fate earned through works in previous existences) and who was destined for the life of the spirit could ignore this injunction with impunity, for to him, these obscenities mean nothing. That was also why the two seductresses stood at the temple entrance, luring the people to fulfill their dharma, because only in this way could the ordinary man attain higher spiritual development. And since the temple represented the whole world, all human activities were portrayed. Because most people are always thinking of sex anyway, the great majority of the temple sculptures were of an erotic nature. For this reason, too, he said, the lingam (phallus) stands in the sacred cavity of the adyton (Holy of Holies), in the garbha griha (house of the womb). This pundit was a Tantrist (scholastic; tantra = 'book')." -- C. G. Jung, from Segal, Rober A. (1992). *The Gnostic Jung*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p. 86. ISBN 978-0-691-01923-9.

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For the 2000 essay collection, see [Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-earth](#).

Diagram of the documents comprising Tolkien's Legendarium, as interpreted very strictly, strictly, or more broadly

Navigable diagram of more or less inclusive definitions of "Tolkien's legendarium". Most

of it is in Christopher Tolkien's 12-volume *The History of Middle-earth* published between 1983 and 1996, though that includes 4 volumes on *The History of The Lord of the Rings*, which stands alongside John D. Rateliff's *The History of The Hobbit*. The strictest definition is a selection of documents from the 12-volume set, the phases of Tolkien's Elven legends. Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans use the term broadly to encompass all Tolkien's Middle-earth writings, including the published novels. The two time-travel novels were attempts to create a frame story for *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien's *legendarium* is the body of J. R. R. Tolkien's mythopoeic writing, unpublished in his lifetime, that forms the background to his *The Lord of the Rings*, and which his son Christopher summarized in his compilation of *The Silmarillion* and documented in his 12-volume series *The History of Middle-earth*. The *legendarium*'s origins reach back to 1914, when Tolkien began writing poems and story sketches, drawing maps, and inventing languages and names as a private project to create a mythology for England. The earliest story, "The Voyage of Earendel, the Evening Star", is from 1914; he revised and rewrote the *legendarium* stories for most of his adult life.

The Hobbit (1937), Tolkien's first published novel, was not originally part of the larger mythology but became linked to it. Both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954 and 1955) are set in the Third Age of Middle-earth, while virtually all of his earlier writing had been set in the first two ages of the world. *The Lord of the Rings* occasionally alludes to figures and events from the *legendarium* to create an impression of depth, but such ancient tales are depicted as being remembered by few until the story makes them relevant.

After *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien returned to his older stories to bring them to publishable form, but never completed the task. Tolkien's son Christopher chose portions of his late father's vast collection of unpublished material and shaped them into *The Silmarillion* (1977), a semi-chronological and semi-complete narrative of the mythical world and its origins. The sales were sufficient to enable him to work on and publish many volumes of his father's *legendarium* stories and drafts; some were presented as completed tales, while others illustrated his father's complex creative process. Tolkien research, a continuing examination of Tolkien's works and supporting mythology, became a scholarly area of study soon after his death in 1973.

Etymology

Main article: *Legendary* (hagiography)

A battle scene from the 14th century Anjou *Legendarium*

A *legendarium* is a literary collection of legends. This medieval Latin noun originally referred mainly to texts detailing legends of the lives of saints. A surviving example is the Anjou *Legendarium*, dating from the 14th century.^[1] Quotations in the Oxford English Dictionary for the synonymous noun *legendary* date from 1513. The Middle English South English *Legendary* is an example of this form of the noun.^[T 1]

Documents included

Tolkien's usage

Tolkien described his works as a "legendarium" in four letters from 1951 to 1955, a period in which he was attempting to have his unfinished Silmarillion published alongside the more complete *The Lord of the Rings*. On the Silmarillion, he wrote in 1951, "This legendarium ends with a vision of the end of the world, its breaking and remaking, and the recovery of the Silmarilli and the 'light before the Sun'";[T 2] and in 1954, "Actually in the imagination of this story we are now living on a physically round Earth. But the whole 'legendarium' contains a transition from a flat world ... to a globe".[T 3]

On both texts, he explained in 1954 that "... my legendarium, especially the 'Downfall of Númenor' which lies immediately behind *The Lord of the Rings*, is based on my view: that Men are essentially mortal and must not try to become 'immortal' in the flesh",[T 4] and in 1955, "But the beginning of the legendarium, of which the Trilogy is part (the conclusion), was an attempt to reorganise some of the Kalevala".[T 5]

Rateliff's definition

"Tolkien's legendarium" is defined narrowly in John D. Rateliff's *The History of The Hobbit* as the body of Tolkien's work consisting of:[T 6]

The Book of Lost Tales[T 6]

The Sketch of the Mythology and contemporary alliterative verses[T 6]

The 1930 Quenta Noldorinwa and first Annals[T 6]

The 1937 Quenta Silmarillion and later Annals[T 6]

The later Quenta[T 6]

The final Annals[T 6]

These, with *The Lays of Beleriand*, written from 1918 onwards, comprise the different "phases" of Tolkien's Elven legendary writings, posthumously edited and published in *The Silmarillion* and in their original forms in Christopher Tolkien's series *The History of Middle-earth*. [T 6]

Scholarly usage

Other Tolkien scholars have used the term legendarium in a variety of contexts.[2][3][4] Christopher Tolkien's introduction to *The History of Middle-earth* series talks about the "primary 'legendarium'", for the core episodes and themes of *The Silmarillion* which were not abandoned in his father's constant redrafting of the work.[T 7]

The scholars Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter edited a scholarly collection "Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on *The History of Middle-earth*". Flieger writes that "...the greatest [event] is the creation of the Silmarils, the Gems of light that give their names to the whole legendarium", equating the legendarium with the *Silmarillion* (which with italics denotes the 1977 book published under that name, and without italics means the larger body of un-edited drafts used to create that work).[2]

In the *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, David Bratman writes that "*The History of Middle-*

earth is a longitudinal study of the development and elaboration of Tolkien's legendarium through his transcribed manuscripts, with textual commentary by the editor, Christopher Tolkien." [3]

Dickerson and Evans use the phrase "legendarium" to encompass the entirety of Tolkien's Middle-earth writings "for convenience". [4] This would encompass texts such as the incomplete drafts of stories published before *The History of Middle-earth* in the 1980 *Unfinished Tales*. [T 8]

Shaun Gunner of The Tolkien Society has called the 2021 collection of Tolkien's previously unpublished legendarium writings *The Nature of Middle-earth*, edited by Carl F. Hostetter, "an unofficial 13th volume of *The History of Middle-earth* series". [5]

Development

A private mythology

Further information: A mythology for England

Unlike "fictional universes" constructed for the purpose of writing and publishing popular fiction, Tolkien's legendarium for a long period was a private project, concerned with questions of philology, cosmology, theology and mythology. His biographer Humphrey Carpenter writes that although by 1923 Tolkien had almost completed *The Book of Lost Tales*, "it was almost as if he did not want to finish it", beginning instead to rewrite it; he suggests that Tolkien may have doubted if a publisher would take it, and notes that Tolkien was a perfectionist, and further that he was perhaps afraid of finishing as he wished to go on with his sub-creation, his invention of myth in Middle-earth. [6]

Tolkien first began working on the stories that would become *The Silmarillion* in 1914. [T 9] His reading, in 1914, of the Old English manuscript *Christ I* led to Earendel and the first element of his legendarium, "The Voyage of Earendel, the Evening Star". [7] He intended his stories to become a mythology that would explain the origins of English history and culture, [T 10] and to provide the necessary "historical" background for his invented Elvish languages. Much of this early work was written while Tolkien, then a British officer returned from France during World War I, was in hospital and on sick leave. [T 11] He completed "The Fall of Gondolin" in late 1916. [T 12]

He called his collection of nascent stories *The Book of Lost Tales*. [T 13] This became the name for the first two volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, which include these early texts. [T 14] Tolkien never completed *The Book of Lost Tales*; he left it to compose the poems "The Lay of Leithian" (in 1925) and "The Lay of the Children of Húrin" (possibly as early as 1918). [T 13]

The first complete version of *The Silmarillion* was the "Sketch of the Mythology" written in 1926 [T 15] (later published in Volume IV of *The History of Middle-earth*). The "Sketch" was a 28-page synopsis written to explain the background of the story of Túrin to R. W. Reynolds, a friend to whom Tolkien had sent several of the stories. [T 15] From the "Sketch" Tolkien developed a fuller narrative version of *The Silmarillion* called *Quenta*

Noldorinwa[T 16] (also included in Volume IV). The Quenta Noldorinwa was the last version of The Silmarillion that Tolkien completed.[T 16]

Ælfwine framing device

Further information: Ælfwine (Tolkien) and Time travel in The Lord of the Rings

The stories in The Book of Lost Tales employ the narrative framing device of an Anglo-Saxon mariner named Ælfwine or Eriol or Ottor Wæfre who finds the island of Tol Eressëa, where the Elves live, and the Elves tell him their history. He collects, translates from Old English, and writes the mythology that appears in The History of Middle-earth. [T 14][T 17] Ælfwine means "Elf-friend" in Old English; men whose names have the same meaning, such as Alboin, Alwin, and Elendil, were to appear in the two unfinished time travel novels, The Lost Road in 1936 and The Notion Club Papers in 1945, as the protagonists reappeared in each of several different times.[8]

There is no such framework in the published version of The Silmarillion, but the Narn i Hîn Húrin is introduced with the note "Here begins that tale which Ælfwine made from the Húrinien." [T 18] Tolkien never fully dropped the idea of multiple 'voices' who collected the stories over the millennia.[9]

A context for The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings

Further information: The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings

When Tolkien published The Hobbit in 1937 (which was itself not originally intended for publication, but as a story told privately to his children), [T 19] the narrative of the published text was loosely influenced by the legendarium as a context, but was not designed to be part of it. Carpenter comments that not until Tolkien began to write its sequel, The Lord of the Rings, did he realise the significance of hobbits in his mythology. [10]

In 1937, encouraged by the success of The Hobbit, Tolkien submitted to his publisher George Allen & Unwin an incomplete but more fully developed version of The Silmarillion called Quenta Silmarillion. [T 13] The reader rejected the work as being obscure and "too Celtic". [T 20] The publisher instead asked Tolkien to write a sequel to The Hobbit. [T 20] Tolkien began to revise the Silmarillion, but soon turned to the sequel, which became The Lord of the Rings. [T 21]

Writing The Lord of the Rings during the 1940s, Tolkien was attempting to address the dilemma of creating a narrative consistent with a "sequel" of the published The Hobbit and a desire to present a more comprehensive view of its large unpublished background. He renewed work on the Silmarillion after completing The Lord of the Rings, [T 22] and he greatly desired to publish the two works together. [T 23] When it became clear that would not be possible, Tolkien turned his full attention to preparing The Lord of the Rings for publication. [T 24] John D. Rateliff has analysed the complex relationship between The Hobbit and The Silmarillion, providing evidence that they were related from the start of The Hobbit's composition. [11]

Towards publishable form

Further information: The Silmarillion

With the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien in the late 1950s returned to the *Silmarillion*, planning to revise the material of his legendarium into a form "fit for publication", a task which kept him occupied until his death in 1973, without attaining a completed state.[T 22] The legendarium has indeed been called "a jumble of overlapping and often competing stories, annals, and lexicons." [12] Much of his later writing was however concerned more with the theological and philosophical underpinnings of the work, rather than with the narratives themselves. By this time, he had doubts about fundamental aspects of the work that went back to the earliest versions of the stories, and it seems that he felt the need to resolve these problems before he could produce the "final" version of *The Silmarillion*. During this time he wrote extensively on such topics as the nature of evil in Arda, the origin of Orcs, the customs of the Elves, the nature and means of Elvish rebirth, the "flat" world, and the story of the Sun and Moon. In any event, with one or two exceptions, he made little change to the narratives during the remaining years of his life.[T 22]

A presented collection

Further information: Editorial framing of *The Lord of the Rings*

Tolkien went to great lengths to present his work as a collection of documents "within the fictional world", [9] including preparing facsimile pages from *The Book of Mazarbul* for *The Lord of the Rings*. [T 25] [9]

The scholar Verlyn Flieger writes that Tolkien thought of his legendarium as a presented collection, with a frame story that changed over the years, first with an Ælfwine-type character who translates the "Golden Book" of the sages Rumil or Pengoloð; later, having the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins collect the stories into the Red Book of Westmarch, translating mythological Elvish documents in Rivendell. [13]

The scholar Gergely Nagy observes that Tolkien "thought of his works as texts within the fictional world" (his emphasis), and that the overlapping of different and sometimes contradictory accounts was central to his desired effect. Nagy notes that Tolkien went so far as to create facsimile pages from the Dwarves' *Book of Mazarbul* that is found by the Fellowship in Moria. [9] Further, Tolkien was a philologist; Nagy comments that Tolkien may have been intentionally imitating the philological style of Elias Lönnrot, compiler of the Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*; or of St Jerome, Snorri Sturluson, Jacob Grimm, or Nikolai Gruntvig, all of whom Tolkien saw as exemplars of a professional and creative philology. [9] This was, Nagy believes, what Tolkien thought essential if he was to present a mythology for England, since such a thing had to have been written by many hands. [9] Further, writes Nagy, Christopher Tolkien "inserted himself in the functional place of Bilbo" as editor and collator, in his view "reinforcing the mythopoeic effect" that his father had wanted to achieve, making the published book do what Bilbo's book was meant to do, and so unintentionally realising his father's intention. [9]

Christopher Tolkien's editorial framing of *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* presents it as a set of scholarly texts.[14]

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Christopher Tolkien's editorial framing of the 12 volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* presents his father's legendarium, and the books derived from it, as a set of historic texts, analogous to the presentation of genuine scholarly works like *The Monsters and the Critics*; and it creates a narrative voice throughout the series, a figure of Christopher Tolkien himself.[14]

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See also

Middle-earth canon – the set of Tolkien's writings on Middle-earth

J. R. R. Tolkien bibliography – list of all Tolkien's writings

J. R. R. Tolkien's influences – influences on Tolkien's Middle-earth writing

Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on *The History of Middle-earth* – a 2000 collection of scholarly essays on the legendarium

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J. R. R. Tolkien

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Key Aspects of CE5 Contact:

Human-Initiated: Participants actively try to make contact, rather than waiting for it to happen.

Meditation & Consciousness: Core techniques involve deep, shared meditation to project intentions and raise consciousness, using specific tones and signals.

Peaceful Intent: The goal is benevolent, cooperative communication with advanced ETs.

Dr. Steven Greer: Popularized the concept through the Center for the Study of Extraterrestrial Intelligence (CSETI).

Tools & Community: Apps and online groups help users find others nearby and provide training materials for the protocols.

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CE5 contact is a practice within ufology aimed at bridging the gap between humanity and extraterrestrial life through focused spiritual and technological effort, as detailed in works like Close Encounters of the Fifth Kind.

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Devils Tower

(Bear Lodge)

Mathó Thípila (Lakota), Daxpitcheeaasáao (Crow)[1]

Highest point

Elevation 5,112 ft (1,558 m) NAVD 88[2]

Coordinates 44°35'26"N 104°42'55"W[3]

Geography

Map

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Location	Crook County, Wyoming, United States
----------	--------------------------------------

Parent range Bear Lodge Mountains, part of the Black Hills

Topo map USGS Devils Tower

Geology

Mountain type Laccolith

Climbing

First ascent William Rogers and Willard Ripley, July 4, 1893

Easiest route Durrance Route

Devils Tower National Monument

IUCN category III (natural monument or feature)[4]

Map showing the location of Devils Tower National Monument

Location in the United States

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Nearest city Hulett, Wyoming
Coordinates 44°35′26″N 104°42′55″W
Area 1,346 acres (5.45 km²)[5]
Established September 24, 1906; 119 years ago[6]
Visitors 499,031 (in 2017)[7]
Governing body National Park Service
Website Devils Tower National Monument

Devils Tower in 1900 (left), and red sandstone and siltstone cliffs above the Belle Fourche River (right)

Devils Tower (also known as Mathó Thípila or Bear Lodge)[8] is a laccolithic butte, composed of igneous rock in the Bear Lodge Ranger District of the Black Hills, near Hulett and Sundance in Crook County, northeastern Wyoming, above the Belle Fourche River. It rises 1,267 feet (386 m) above the Belle Fourche River, standing 867 feet (264 m) from summit to base. The summit is 5,112 feet (1,558 m) above sea level.

Devils Tower National Monument was the first United States national monument, established on September 24, 1906, by President Theodore Roosevelt.[9] The monument's boundary encloses an area of 1,347 acres (545 ha).

Name

Indigenous names for the monolith include "Bear's House" or "Bear's Lodge" (or "Bear's Tipi", "Home of the Bear", "Bear's Lair"); Cheyenne, Lakota: Mathó Thípila, Crow: Daxpitcheeasáao ("Home of Bears"[10]), "Aloft on a Rock" (Kiowa), "Tree Rock", "Great Gray Horn",[11] and "Brown Buffalo Horn" (Lakota: Ptehé Ği).[citation needed]

The name "Devil's Tower" originated in 1875 during an expedition led by Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, when his interpreter reportedly misinterpreted a native name to mean "Bad God's Tower".[11] All information signs in that area use the name "Devils Tower", following a geographic naming standard whereby the apostrophe is omitted.[12]

In 2005, a proposal to recognize several indigenous ties through the additional designation of the monolith as Bear Lodge National Historic Landmark were opposed by United States Representative Barbara Cubin, arguing that a "name change will harm the tourist trade and bring economic hardship to area communities".[13] In November 2014, Arvol Looking Horse proposed renaming the geographical feature "Bear Lodge" and submitted the request to the United States Board on Geographic Names. A second proposal was submitted to request that the U.S. acknowledge what it described as the "offensive" mistake in keeping the current name and to rename the monument and sacred site into Bear Lodge National Historic Landmark. The formal public comment period ended in fall 2015. Local state senator Ogden Driskill opposed the change.[14] [15] The name was not changed.

Geology

Geologic cross section (left), and stratigraphic column (right)

National monument markers depicting the sedimentary rocks in the area (left), and three theories explaining the origin of the igneous rocks (right)

Devils Tower is composed of a porphyritic phonolite (left). Close-up view of the columns (right).

The landscape surrounding Devils Tower is composed mostly of sedimentary rocks. The oldest rocks visible in Devils Tower National Monument were laid down in a shallow sea during the Triassic.[16] This dark red sandstone and maroon siltstone, interbedded with shale, can be seen along the Belle Fourche River. Oxidation of iron minerals causes the redness of the rocks. This rock layer is known as the Spearfish Formation. Above the Spearfish Formation is a thin band of white gypsum, called the Gypsum Springs Formation, Jurassic in age. Overlying this formation is the Sundance Formation.[17] During the Paleocene Epoch, 56 to 66 million years ago, the Rocky Mountains and the Black Hills were uplifted.[16] Magma rose through the crust, intruding into the existing sedimentary rock layers.[16]

Geologists Carpenter and Russell studied Devils Tower in the late 19th century and came to the conclusion that it was formed by an igneous intrusion.[18] In 1907, geologists Nelson Horatio Darton and C.C. O'Harra (of the South Dakota School of Mines) theorized that Devils Tower must be an eroded remnant of a laccolith.[19]

The igneous material that forms the Tower is a phonolite porphyry intruded about 40.5 million years ago,[20] a light to dark-gray or greenish-gray igneous rock with conspicuous crystals of white feldspar.[21] As the magma cooled, hexagonal columns formed (though sometimes 4-, 5-, and 7-sided columns were possible), up to 20 feet (6.1 m) wide and 600 feet (180 m) tall.

As rain and snow continue to erode the sedimentary rocks surrounding the Tower's base, more of Devils Tower will be exposed. Nonetheless, the exposed portions of the Tower still experience certain amounts of erosion. Cracks along the columns are subject to water and ice erosion. Portions, or even entire columns, of rock at Devils Tower are continually breaking off and falling. Piles of broken columns, boulders, small rocks, and stones, called scree, lie at the base of the tower, indicating that it was once wider than it is today.[16]

The geologically related Missouri Buttes are located 3.5 mi (5.6 km) northwest of Devils Tower.

Climate

Climate data for Devils Tower #2, Wyoming, 1991–2020 normals, 1959–2020 extremes:
3862 ft (1177 m)

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Year												

Record high °F (°C) 65

(18)	71
(22)	80
(27)	90
(32)	97
(36)	105
(41)	108
(42)	103
(39)	103
(39)	92
(33)	80
(27)	67
(19)	108
(42)	

Mean maximum °F (°C) 51.9

(11.1)	54.7
(12.6)	69.8
(21.0)	79.1
(26.2)	85.4
(29.7)	91.5
(33.1)	97.2
(36.2)	96.4
(35.8)	92.8
(33.8)	82.7
(28.2)	67.6
(19.8)	53.9
(12.2)	99.0
(37.2)	

Mean daily maximum °F (°C) 34.2

(1.2)	36.9
(2.7)	47.4
(8.6)	56.6
(13.7)	65.8
(18.8)	76.3
(24.6)	85.3
(29.6)	84.6
(29.2)	74.7
(23.7)	59.5
(15.3)	45.2
(7.3)	35.4
(1.9)	58.5

(14.7)

Daily mean °F (°C) 21.0

(−6.1) 23.8

(−4.6) 34.1

(1.2) 42.8

(6.0) 52.4

(11.3) 62.5

(16.9) 70.0

(21.1) 68.5

(20.3) 58.4

(14.7) 45.0

(7.2) 32.1

(0.1) 22.4

(−5.3) 44.4

(6.9)

Mean daily minimum °F (°C) 7.8

(−13.4) 10.8

(−11.8) 20.8

(−6.2) 28.9

(−1.7) 39.1

(3.9) 48.7

(9.3) 54.7

(12.6) 52.4

(11.3) 42.1

(5.6) 30.4

(−0.9) 18.9

(−7.3) 9.3

(−12.6) 30.3

(−0.9)

Mean minimum °F (°C) −17.5

(−27.5) −14.0

(−25.6) −3.3

(−19.6) 10.8

(−11.8) 22.5

(−5.3) 34.7

(1.5) 42.6

(5.9) 38.8

(3.8) 27.3

(−2.6) 12.3

(−10.9) −3.5

(−19.7) −13.1

(−25.1) −25.9

(−32.2)

Record low °F (°C) −41

(−41) −44

(-42) -32
 (-36) -12
 (-24) 11
 (-12) 26
 (-3) 31
 (-1) 29
 (-2) 14
 (-10) -20
 (-29) -35
 (-37) -48
 (-44) -48
 (-44)

Average precipitation inches (mm) 0.72

(18) 0.76
 (19) 1.13
 (29) 1.98
 (50) 2.93
 (74) 3.22
 (82) 2.14
 (54) 1.90
 (48) 1.32
 (34) 1.53
 (39) 0.78
 (20) 0.68
 (17) 19.09
 (484)

Average snowfall inches (cm) 8.8

(22) 9.3
 (24) 7.3
 (19) 5.3
 (13) 0.4
 (1.0) 0.0
 (0.0) 0.0
 (0.0) 0.0
 (0.0) 0.0
 (0.0) 1.8
 (4.6) 6.3
 (16) 9.6
 (24) 48.8
 (123.6)

Source 1: NOAA[22]

Source 2: XMACIS (records & monthly max/mins)[23]

Native American cultural beliefs

Devils Tower inspired many geomyths.

According to the traditional beliefs of Native American peoples, the Kiowa and Lakota, a group of girls went out to play and were spotted by several giant bears, who began to chase them. In an effort to escape the bears, the girls climbed atop a rock, fell to their knees, and prayed to the Great Spirit to save them. Hearing their prayers, the Great Spirit made the rock rise from the ground towards the heavens so that the bears could not reach the girls. The bears, in an effort to climb the rock, left deep claw marks in the sides, which had become too steep to climb. Those are the marks which appear today on the sides of Devils Tower. When the girls reached the sky, they were turned into the stars of the Pleiades.[24]

Another version tells that two Sioux boys wandered far from their village when Mato the bear, a huge creature that had claws the size of tipi poles, spotted them, and wanted to eat them for breakfast. He was almost upon them when the boys prayed to Wakan Tanka the Creator to help them. They rose up on a huge rock, while Mato tried to get up from every side, leaving huge scratch marks as he did. Finally, he sauntered off, disappointed and discouraged. The bear came to rest east of the Black Hills at what is now Bear Butte. Wanblee, the eagle, helped the boys off the rock and back to their village. A painting depicting this legend by artist Herbert A. Collins hangs over the fireplace in the visitor center at Devils Tower.

In a Cheyenne version of the story, the giant bear pursues the girls and kills most of them. Two sisters escape back to their home with the bear still tracking them. They tell two boys that the bear can only be killed with an arrow shot through the underside of its foot. The boys have the sisters lead the bear to Devils Tower and trick it into thinking they have climbed the rock. The boys attempt to shoot the bear through the foot while it repeatedly attempts to climb up and slides back down leaving more claw marks each time. The bear was finally scared off when an arrow came very close to its left foot. This last arrow continued to go up and never came down.[25]

Wooden Leg, a Northern Cheyenne, recounted another legend told to him by an old man while they were traveling together past Devils Tower around 1866–1868. An Indigenous man decided to sleep at the base of Bear Lodge next to a buffalo head. In the morning, he discovered that both he and the buffalo head had been transported to the top of the rock by the Great Medicine, with no way to descend. He spent another day and night on the rock without food or water. After praying all day and then going to sleep, he awoke to find that the Great Medicine had brought him back down to the ground, but had left the buffalo head at the top near the edge. Wooden Leg asserted that the buffalo head was clearly visible through the old man's spyglass. At that time, the tower had never been climbed, and a buffalo head at the top was otherwise inexplicable. [26]

The buffalo head gives this story special significance for the Northern Cheyenne. All the Cheyenne maintained in their camps a sacred teepee to the Great Medicine containing the tribal sacred objects. In the case of the Northern Cheyenne, the sacred object was a buffalo head.[27]

N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) was given the name Tsoai-talee (Rock Tree Boy) by Pohd-lohk, a Kiowa elder, linking the child to the Devils Tower bear myth. To reinforce this mythic connection, his parents took him there.[28] Momaday incorporated the bear myth as unifying subtext into his 1989 novel *The Ancient Child*. [29]

U.S. history

Fur trappers may have visited Devils Tower, but they left no written evidence of having done so. The first documented non-Indigenous visitors were members of Captain William F. Reynolds's 1859 expedition to Yellowstone. Sixteen years later, Colonel Richard I. Dodge escorted an Office of Indian Affairs scientific survey party to the massive rock formation and coined the name Devils Tower.[30] Recognizing its unique characteristics, the United States Congress designated the area a U.S. forest reserve in 1892 and in 1906 Devils Tower became the nation's first National monument.[31]

Climbing

Main article: Durrance Route

Old climbing ladder on Devils Tower (left), and a climber on the tower (right)

A sign informs visitors of the Native American heritage.

As of 1994, climbing Devils Tower had increased in popularity. About 1.3% of the monument's 400,000 annual visitors climbed Devils Tower, mostly using traditional climbing techniques.[32] The first known ascent of Devils Tower by any method occurred on July 4, 1893, and is credited to William Rogers and Willard Ripley, local ranchers in the area. They completed this first ascent after constructing a ladder of wooden pegs driven into cracks in the rock face. A few of these wooden pegs are still intact and are visible on the tower when hiking along the 1.3-mile (2.1 km) Tower Trail at Devils Tower National Monument. Over the following 30 years, many climbs were made using this method before the ladder fell into disrepair.

The first ascent using modern climbing techniques was made by Fritz Wiessner with William P. House and Lawrence Coveney in 1937. Wiessner led almost the entire climb free, placing only a single piece of fixed gear, a piton, which he later regretted, deeming it unnecessary.

In 1941 George Hopkins parachuted onto Devils Tower,[33] without permission, as a publicity stunt resulting from a bet. He had intended to descend by a 1,000-foot (300 m) rope dropped to him after successfully landing on the butte, but the package containing the rope, a sledgehammer and a car axle to be driven into the rock as an anchor point slid over the edge. As the weather deteriorated, a second attempt was made to drop equipment, but Hopkins deemed it unusable after the rope became snarled and frozen due to the rain and wind. Hopkins was stranded for six days, exposed to cold, rain and 50 mph (80 km/h) winds before a mountain rescue team led by Jack Durrance, who had

successfully climbed Devils Tower in 1938, finally reached him and brought him down.
[34][35] His entrapment and rescue was widely covered by the media of the time.[36]

Today, hundreds of climbers scale the sheer rock walls of Devils Tower each summer. The most common route is the Durrance Route, which was the second free route established in 1938. There are many established and documented climbing routes covering every side of the tower, ascending the various vertical cracks and columns of the rock. The difficulty of these routes ranges from relatively easy to some of the most challenging in the world. All climbers are required to register with a park ranger before and after attempting a climb. No overnight camping at the summit is allowed; climbers return to base on the same day they ascend.[37][full citation needed]

The Tower is sacred to several Plains tribes, including the Lakota, Cheyenne and Kiowa. Because of this, many Native American leaders objected to climbers ascending the monument, considering this to be a desecration. The climbers argued that they had a right to climb the Tower, since it is on federal land. A compromise was eventually reached with a voluntary climbing ban during the month of June when the tribes are conducting ceremonies around the monument. Climbers are asked, but not required, to stay off the Tower in June. According to the PBS documentary *In the Light of Reverence*, approximately 85% of climbers honor the ban and voluntarily choose not to climb the Tower during the month of June. However, several climbers along with the Mountain States Legal Foundation sued the Park Service, claiming an inappropriate government entanglement with religion.[38][full citation needed][39]

Incidents

Seven people have died climbing Devils Tower in the park's 118 year history. Rescues of stranded and under-equipped climbers on the formation are common.[40] The most recent fatality was in September 2024, when a climber fell to his death while descending, leaving his climbing partner stranded without a rope on the face of the tower until help arrived.[41]

Deer grazing at the national monument entrance

Wildlife

Devils Tower National Monument protects many species of wildlife, such as white-tailed deer, prairie dogs, and bald eagles.[42][43]

In popular culture

The 1977 movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* used the formation as a plot element and as the location of its climactic scenes.[44][45] The film's popularity resulted in a large increase in visitors and climbers to the monument.[46]

National Register of Historic Places

Four areas of Devils Tower National Monument are on the National Register of Historic Places:

Entrance Road
Entrance Station
Old Headquarters Area Historic District
Tower Ladder
See also
icon Volcanoes portal
 Earth sciences portal
Elephant Butte
List of national monuments of the United States
Shiprock

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External links

Wikimedia Commons has media related to Devils Tower.

Wikivoyage has a travel guide for Devils Tower.

Devils Tower National Monument – National Park Service

The short film Tower of Stone is available for free viewing and download at the Internet Archive. Public domain, produced by National Park Service.

450 megapixel high-resolution photo of Devils Tower

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Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming

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Sator Square

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For other uses, see Sator.

A Sator Square (laid out in the SATOR format), etched onto a wall in the medieval fortress town of Oppède-le-Vieux, France

The Sator Square (or Rotas-Sator Square or Templar Magic Square) is a two-dimensional acrostic class of word square containing a five-word Latin palindrome.[1] The earliest squares were found at Roman-era sites, all in ROTAS form (where the top line is "ROTAS", not "SATOR"), with the earliest discovery at Pompeii (and also likely pre-AD 62).[a] The earliest square with Christian-associated imagery dates from the sixth century.[b] By the Middle Ages, Sator squares existed in Europe, Asia Minor, and North Africa.[1][2] In 2022, the Encyclopedia Britannica called it "the most familiar lettered square in the Western world".[3]

A significant volume of academic research has been published on the square, but after more than a century, there is no consensus on its origin and meaning.[1][4][5] The emergence of the "Paternoster theory" in 1926 led to a brief consensus among academics that the square was created by early Christians, but the subsequent discoveries at Pompeii led many academics to believe that the square was more likely created as a Roman word puzzle (per the Roma-Amor puzzle), which was later adopted by Christians. This origin theory, however, fails to explain how a Roman word puzzle became such a powerful religious and magical medieval symbol. It has instead been argued that the square was created in its ROTAS form as a Jewish symbol, embedded with cryptic religious symbolism, which was later adopted in its SATOR form by Christians.[1][2][6] Other less-supported academic origin theories include a Pythagorean or Stoic puzzle, a Gnostic or Orphic or Italian pagan amulet, a cryptic Mithraic or Semitic numerology charm, or that it was a device for assessing wind direction.[1]

The square has long associations with magical powers throughout its history (and even up to the 19th century in North and South America), including a perceived ability to extinguish fires, particularly in Germany. The square appears in early and late medieval medical textbooks such as the Trotula, and was employed as a medieval cure for many ailments, particularly for dog bites and rabies, as well as for insanity, and relief during childbirth.[1][2]

It has featured in a diverse range of contemporary artworks including fiction books, paintings, musical scores, and films,[5] and most notably in Christopher Nolan's 2020 film Tenet.[7] In 2020, The Daily Telegraph called it "one of the closest things the classical world had to a meme".[8]

Description and naming

Sator square (in ROTAS form) on the eighth-century facade of Abbey of St. Peter ad Oratorium in Italy

The Sator square is arranged as a 5 × 5 grid consisting of five 5-letter words, thus totaling 25 characters. It uses 8 different Latin letters: 5 consonants (S, T, R, P, N) and 3

vowels (A, E, O). In some versions, the vertical and horizontal lines of the grid are also drawn, but in many cases, there are no such lines. The square is described as a two-dimensional palindrome, or word square, which is a particular class of a double acrostic.
[3][9]

The square comes in two forms: ROTAS (left, below), and SATOR (right, below):[2][6]

R O T A S
O P E R A
T E N E T
A R E P O
S A T O R

S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S

The earliest Roman-era versions of the square have the word ROTAS as the top line (called a ROTAS-form square, left above), but the inverted version with SATOR in the top line became more dominant from early medieval times (called a SATOR-form square, right above).[1] Some academics call it a Rotas-Sator Square,[2][6] and some of them refer to the object as a rebus,[1][10] or a magic square.[2] Since medieval times, it has also been known as a Templar Magic Square.[1][11]

Discovery and dating

One of the four Sator squares (all in ROTAS form) found at Dura-Europos, Syria, circa AD 200.

The oldest known square. Found in 1936 on a column in the Palestra Grande (it) (CIL 8623), it is now kept in the Pompeii Museum.[12]

The existence of the square was long recognized from early medieval times, and various examples have been found in Europe, Asia Minor, North Africa (in mainly Coptic settlements), and the Americas.[1][10] Medieval examples of the square in SATOR form abound, including the earliest French example in a Carolingian Bible from AD 822 at the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Many medieval European churches and castles have Sator square inscriptions.[1][10]

The first recognized serious academic study of the Sator square is the 1881 publication of Reinhold Köhler's (de) historical survey in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (de), which was titled "Sator-Arepe-Formel". Since then, a considerable body of academic research has been published on the topic.[1][10]

Until the 1930s, a Coptic papyrus with the square in the ROTAS form dating from the fourth or fifth century AD was considered the earliest version.[b][10][13] In 1889, British ancient historian Francis Haverfield identified the 1868 discovery of a Sator square found in ROTAS form scratched on a plaster wall in the Roman settlement of Corinium at Cirencester to be of Roman origin; however, his assertion was discounted at the time by most academics, who considered the square to be an "early medieval charm".[1][14]

Haverfield was ultimately proved right by the 1931–32 excavations at Dura-Europos in Syria that uncovered three separate Sator square inscriptions, all in ROTAS form, on the interior walls of a Roman military office (and a fourth a year later) that were dated from circa AD 200.[1][15]

In 1936, Italian archaeologist Matteo Della Corte (it) discovered a Sator square, also in ROTAS form, inscribed on a column in the Palestra Grande (it) (the gymnasium) near the Amphitheatre of Pompeii (CIL IV 8623).[16] This discovery led Della Corte to reexamine a fragment of a square, again also in ROTAS form, that he had made in 1925 at the house of Publius Paquius Proculus, also at Pompeii (CIL IV 8123). The square at the house of Publius Paquius Proculus was dated between AD 50 and AD 79 (based on the decorative style of the interior), and the palestra square find was dated pre-AD 62 (and therefore the earthquake of AD 62),[a] making it the oldest known Sator square discovery to date.[1][10]

Translation

Individual words

The words are in Latin, and the following translations are known by scholars:[2][6]

SATOR

(nominative noun; from serere, "to sow") sower, planter, founder, progenitor (usually divine); originator; literally 'seeder';[2][6]

AREPO

unknown word, perhaps a proper name, either invented to complete the palindrome or of a non-Latin origin (see § Arepo interpretations);[2][6]

TENET

(verb; from tenere, 'to hold') he/she/it holds, keeps, comprehends, possesses, masters, preserves, sustains;[2][6]

OPERA

(ablative [see opera] singular noun) service, pains, labor; care, effort, attention;[2][6]

ROTAS

(rotās, accusative plural of rota) wheels.[2][6]

Sentence construction

Sator form of the square on a door in Grenoble, France

The most direct sentence translation is: "The sower (or, farmer) Arepo holds the wheels with care (or, with care the wheels)".[1][10][14][4][17] Similar translations include: "The farmer Arepo works his wheels",[18] or "Arepo the sower (sator) guides (tenet) the

wheel (rotas) with skill (opera)".[19]

Some academics, such as French historian Jules Quicherat,[10] believe the square should be read in a boustrophedon style (i.e. in alternating directions).[20] The boustrophedon style, which in Greek means "as the ox plows", emphasizes the agricultural aspect of the text of the square.[1] Such a reading when applied to the SATOR-form square, and repeating the central word TENET, gives SATOR OPERA TENET – TENET OPERA SATOR, which has been very loosely interpreted as: "as ye sow, so shall ye reap",[10] while some believe the square should be read as just three words – SATOR OPERA TENET, which they loosely translate as: "The Creator (the author of all things) maintains his works"; both of which could imply Graeco-Roman Stoic and/or Pythagorean origins.[1][5]

British academic Duncan Fishwick observes that the translation from the boustrophedon approach fails when applied to a ROTAS-form square:[10] however, Belgian scholar Paul Grosjean reversed the boustrophedon rule on the ROTAS form (i.e. starting on the right-hand side instead of the left) to get SAT ORARE POTEN, which loosely translates into the Jewish call to prayer, "are you able to pray enough?".[1][10]

Arepo interpretations

The word AREPO is a hapax legomenon, appearing nowhere else in attested Latin literature. Some academics believe it is likely a proper name, or possibly a theophoric name, that was adapted from a non-Latin word or was invented specifically for the Sator square.[10] French historian Jerome Carcopino believed that it came from the Gaulish word for a 'plough'; however, this has been discounted by other academics.[c][10] American ancient legal historian David Daube believed that AREPO represented a Hebrew or Aramaic rendition of the ancient Greek for alpha (Ἀλφα) and omega (ω), bespeaking the "Alpha-Omega" concept (cf. Isaiah 44.6, and Revelation 1:8) from early Judeo-Christianity.[1] J. Gwyn Griffiths contended that the term AREPO came, via Alexandria, from the attested Egyptian name "Hr-Hp" (ḥr ḥp), which he took to mean "the face of Apis".[1][21] In 1983, Serbian-American scholar Miroslav Marcovich proposed the term AREPO as a Latinized abbreviation of Harpocrates (or "Horus-the-child"), god of the rising sun, also called Γεωργός Ἄρπρον, which Marcovich suggests corresponds to SATOR AREPO. This would translate the square as: "The sower Horus/Harpocrates keeps in check toils and tortures".[1][22][5]

Duncan Fishwick, among other academics, believed that AREPO was simply a residual word that was required to complete what is a complex and sophisticated palindrome (which Fishwick believed was embedded with hidden Jewish symbolism, per the "Jewish Symbol" origin theory below), and to expect more from the word was unreasonable from its likely Jewish creators.[2]

Further anagrams

Attempts have been made to discover "hidden meanings" by the anagrammatic method of rearranging the letters of which the square is composed.[1]

In 1883, German historian Gustav Fritsch reformed the letters to discover an invocation to Satan:[1][10]

SATAN, ORO TE, PRO ARTE A TE SPERO

SATAN, TER ORO TE, OPERA PRAESTO

SATAN, TER ORO TE, REPARATO OPES

French historian Guillaume de Jerphanion catalogued examples that were known formulas for an exorcism such as:[10]

RETRO SATANA, TOTO OPERE ASPER, and the prayers

ORO TE PATER, ORO TE PATER, SANAS

O PATER, ORES PRO AETATE NOSTRA

ORA, OPERARE, OSTENTA TE PASTOR

In 1887, Polish ethnographer Oskar Kolberg amended the strict anagrammatic approach by using abbreviations and thus deduced from the 25 letters of the Sator Square the 36

letters of the monastic rule: SAT ORARE POTEN (TER) ET OPERA(RE) R(ATI)O T(U)A S(IT),[10] which he considered an ancient rule of the Benedictines; French historian

Gaston Letonnelier made a similar approach in 1952 to get the Christian prayer: SAT ORARE POTEN(TIA) ET OPER(A) A ROTA S(ERVANT), which translates as: "Prayer is our strength and will save us from the wheel (of fate?)".[1]

In 1935, German art historian Kuno von Hardenberg (de) believed he discovered the relief the Rose of Sharon gave to Saint Peter for the sin of his denial of Christ, with the anagram PETRO ET REO PATET ROSA SARONA, which translates as "For Peter even guilty the rose of Sharon is open"; academics refuted his interpretation.[1][10]

In 2003, American historian Rose Mary Sheldon listed some of the many diverse sentences that can be produced from anagrams of the square including her favorite: APATOR NERO EST, which would translate as saying that the Roman emperor Nero was the result of a virgin birth.[1]

Origin and meaning

The origin and meaning of the square has eluded a definitive academic consensus even after more than a century of study.[6][4][5] In 1938, British classical historian Donald

Atkinson said the square occupied the "mysterious region where religion, superstition, and magic meet, where words, numbers, and letters are believed, if properly combined,

to exert power over the processes of nature ...".[13] Even by 2003, American academic Rose Mary Sheldon called it "one of the oldest unsolved word puzzles in the world".[1]

In 2018, American ancient classical historian Megan O'Donald still noted that "most interpretations of the ROTAS square have failed to gain consensus due to failings", and, in particular, reconciling the archeological evidence with the square's later adoption as a religious and magical object.[23]

Christian symbol

Adoption by Christians

Irrespective of the theory of its origin, the evidence that the Sator square, particularly in its SATOR form, became adopted into Christian imagery is not disputed by academics.

[1][2] Academics note the repeated association of Christ with the "sower" (or SATOR),[1] and the words of the Sator square have been discovered in Christian settings even in

very early medieval times, including:

Jesuit historian Jean Daniélou claimed that the third century Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (c. AD 200) knew of the square and had written of "Him who joined the beginning with the end, and is the Lord of both, and has shown forth the plough at the end".^[1] Some academics link Irenaeus with creating the association of the five words in the square to the five wounds of Christ.

The Berlin State Museum houses a sixth-century bronze amulet from Asia Minor that has two fish turned toward one another on one side, and a Sator square in Greek characters in a checkerboard pattern on the other side. Written above the square is the word "ICHTHUS", the Greek for fish but also a direct term for Christ; it is the earliest known Christian annotated Sator Square.^{[b][1]}

An illustration in an early Byzantine bible gives the baptismal names of the three Magi as being: ATOR, SATOR, and PERATORAS.^{[1][10]}

In Cappadocia, in the time of Constantine VII (913–959), the shepherds of the Nativity of Jesus are named: SATOR, AREPON, and TENETON.^{[1][10]}

The Sator square appears in diverse Christian communities, such as in Abyssinia where in the Ethiopian Book of the Dead, the individual nails in Christ's cross were called: Sador, Alador, Danet, Adera, Rodas.^[1] These are likely derived from even earlier Coptic Christian works that also ascribe the wounds of Christ and the nails of the cross with names that resemble the five words from the square.^[1]

While there is little doubt among academics that Christians adopted the square, it was not clear that they had originated the symbol.^{[1][14]}

Paternoster theory

Lord's Prayer anagram from the 25 letters of the square, including the Alpha and Omega positioning of the residual As and Os.^{[2][24]} There is an alternative layout proposed with the As and Os positioned at the extreme ends of the Paternoster cross,^{[5][25]} and a Jewish option with the letters laid out in an X-shape (i.e. tau).^[2]

During 1924 to 1926, three people separately discovered,^[d] or rediscovered, that the square could be used to write the name of the Lord's Prayer, the "Paternoster", twice and intersecting in a cross form (see image opposite). The remaining residual letters (two As and two Os) could be placed in the four quadrants of the cross and would represent the Alpha and Omega that are established in Christian symbolism.^{[2][18]} The positioning of the As and Os was further supported by the fact that the position of the Ts in the Sator square formed the points of a cross – there are obscure references in the Epistle of Barnabas to T being a symbol of the cross – and that the As and Os also lay in the four quadrants of this cross.^[10] At the time of this discovery, the earliest known Sator square was from the fourth century,^{[b][1]} further supporting the dating of the Christian symbolism inherent in the Paternoster theory.^[2] Academics considered the Christian origins of the square to be largely resolved.^{[1][14][2][6][15]}

With the subsequent discovery of Sator squares at Pompeii, dating pre-79 AD,^[a] the

Paternoster theory began to lose support, even among notable supporters such as French historian Guillaume de Jerphanion.[10][15] Jerphanion noted that (1) it was improbable that many Christians were present at Pompeii, (2) first-century Christians would have written the square in Greek and not Latin, (3) the Christian concepts of Alpha and Omega only appear after the first century, (4) the symbol of the cross only appears from about AD 130–131, and (5) cryptic Christian symbols only appeared during the persecutions of the third century.[1][10][15]

Jérôme Carcopino claimed the Pompeii squares were added at a later date by looters. The lack of any disturbance to the volcanic deposits at the palestra, however, meant that this was unlikely,[10][14][15] and the Paternoster theory as a proof of Christian origination lost much of its academic support.[1][10][6][15][24]

Regardless of its Christian origins, many academics considered the Paternoster discovery as being a random occurrence to be mathematically impossible.[13] Several examined this mathematical probability including German historian Friedrich Focke (de) and British historian Hugh Last, but without reaching a conclusion.[1] A 1987 computer analysis by William Baines derived a number of "pseudo-Christian formulae" from the square but Baines concluded it proved nothing.[6]

Roman word puzzle

There is considerable contemporary academic support for the theory that the square originated as a Roman-era word puzzle.[1][6][23] Italian historian Arsenio Frugoni found it written in the margin of the *Carme delle scolte modenesi* beside the Roma-Amor palindrome,[1] and Italian classicist Margherita Guarducci noted it was similar to the ROMA OLIM MILO AMOR two-dimensional acrostic word puzzle that was also found at Pompeii (see Wiktionary for details on the Pompeiian graffito), and at Ostia and Bologna. [1] Similarly, another ROTAS-form square scratched into a Roman-era wall in the basement of the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore was found alongside the Roma-Amor, and the Roma-Summus-Amor, palindromes.[26] Duncan Fishwick noted the "composition of palindromes was, in fact, a pastime of Roman landed gentry".[10] American classical epigraphist Rebecca Benefiel noted that by 2012, Pompeii had yielded more than 13,000 separate inscriptions and that the house of Publius Paquius Proculus (where a square was found) had more than 70 pieces of graffiti alone.[4]

A 1969 computer study by Charles Douglas Gunn started with a Roma-Amor square and found 2,264 better versions, of which he considered the Sator square to be the best.[1] The square's origin as a word puzzle solved the problem of AREPO (a word that appears nowhere else in classical writing), as being a necessary component to complete the palindrome.[23]

Fishwick still considered this interpretation unproven and clarified that the apparent discovery of the Roma-Amor palindrome written beside the 1954 discovery of a square on a tile at Aquincum was incorrectly translated (if anything it supported the square as a charm).[10] Fishwick, and others, consider the key failing of the Roman puzzle theory of

origin is the lack of any explanation as to why the square would later become so strongly associated with Christianity, and with being a medieval charm.[10][23][15] Some argue that this can be bridged if considered as a Pythagorean-Stoic puzzle creation.[1][5]

In 2018, Megan O'Donnell argued that the square is less of a pure word puzzle but more a piece of Latin Roman graffiti that should be read figuratively as a wheel (i.e. the ROTAS), and that the textual-visual interplay had parallels with other forms of graffiti found in Pompeii, some of which later became adopted as charms.[23]

Jewish symbol

The central cross created by the vertical and horizontal TENET words, has both Christian and Jewish symbolism (e.g. the "tau cross", or the Hebrew tau "+" symbol).[2][5] It also parallels the Roman system of *Cardo* and *Decumanus*, being central road crosses through towns.[5]

Some prominent academics, including British-Canadian ancient Roman scholar Duncan Fishwick,[2] American ancient legal historian David Daube,[1] and British ancient historian Mary Beard,[27] consider the square as being likely of Jewish origin.[1]

Fishwick notes that the failings of the Paternoster theory (above) are resolved when looked at from a Jewish perspective.[2] Large numbers of Latin-speaking Jews had been settled in Pompeii, and their affinity for cryptic and mystical word symbols was well known.[2][10] The Alpha and Omega concept appears much earlier in Judaism (Ex. 3.14; Is. 41.4, and 44.6), and the letters "aleph" and "tau" are used in the Talmud as symbols of totality.[2][10] The Ts of TENET may be explained not as Christian crosses, but as a Latin form of the Jewish "tau" salvation symbol (from Ezekiel), and its archaic form (+ or X) appears regularly on ossuaries of both Hellenistic and early Roman times.[2][10] Fishwick highlights the central position of the letter N, as Jews attached significance to the utterance of the "Name" (or *nomen*).[2][10]

In addition, Fishwick believes a Jewish origin provides a satisfactory explanation for the Paternoster cross (or X) as the configuration is an archaic Jewish "tau" (+ or X).[2][10] Fishwick draws attention to some liturgical prayers in Judaism, where several prayers refer to "Our Father".[2][10] None of these liturgical prayers, however, can be dated to before Jesus.[28][29] Fishwick concludes that the translations of the words ROTAS OPERA TENET AREPO SATOR are irrelevant, except to the extent that they make some sense and thereby hide a Jewish cryptic charm, and to require them to mean more is "to expect the impossible".[2][10] The motivation for the creation square might have been the Jewish pogroms of AD 19 or AD 49; however, it fell into disuse only to be revived later by Christians facing their own persecution, and who appreciated its hidden Paternoster and Alpha and Omega symbolism, but who focused on the SATOR form (which emphasized the "sower", which was associated with Christ).[2]

Research in 2006 by French classical scholar Nicolas Vinel drew on recent discoveries on the mathematics of ancient magic squares to propose that the square was a "Jewish

cryptogram using Pythagorean arithmetic".[25] Vinel decoded several Jewish concepts in the square, including the reason for AREPO, and was able to explain the word SAUTRAN that appears beside the square that was discovered on the palestra column in Pompeii.[25] Vinel addressed a criticism of the Jewish origin theory – why would the Jews have then abandoned the symbol? – by noting the Greek texts that they also abandoned (e.g. the Septuagint) in favor of Hebrew versions.[25]

Other theories

The amount of academic research published on the Rotas-Sator square is regarded as being considerable (and even described by one source as "immense");[4] American academic Rose Mary Sheldon attempted to catalog and review the most prominent works in a 2003 paper published in *Cryptologia*. [1] Among the more diverse but less supported theories Sheldon recorded were:

Several German academics have written on the links of the square to Pythagoreanism and Stoicism, including philologist Hildebrecht Hommel (de), historian Wolfgang Christian Schneider (de), and Heinz Hoffman, among others.[1][2] Schneider believed the square was an important link between Etruscan religion and Stoic academic philosophy. Hommel believed that in the Stoic tradition, the Ephesian word AREPO would be discarded, and the square would be read in the boustrophedon style as SATOR OPERA TENET, TENET OPERA SATOR, translating as "The Creator preserves his works".[1][5] German scholar Ulrich Ernst (de) writing the Sator square's entry in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* found this theory persuasive,[5] but Miroslav Marcovich refuted the translation.[22]

Several academics link the square to Gnostic origins, such as Jean Doignon, Gustav Maresch, Adolfo Omodeo, and Hildebrecht Hommel (de). English egyptologist J. Gwyn Griffiths explains AREPO as a personal name derived from the Egyptian name "Hr-Hp", and sources the square to an Alexandrine origin where a gnostic tradition employed acrostics.[1][5]

Some academics link the square to Orphic cults, including Serbian historian Milan Budimir who linked the Greek form of AREPO to the name Orpheus.[1][2]

Italian academic Adolfo Omodeo linked the square to Mithraic origins as the Roman-era discoveries were in military locations with whom it was popular, while academic historian Walter O. Moeller attempted to derive a Mithraic relationship using perceived mathematical patterns in the square, but his arguments were not considered convincing by other academics.[1][2][30][31]

Norwegian philologist Samson Eitrem took the last half of the square starting at N to get: "net opera rotans", which translates as "She spins her works", interpreting it to be a feminine being (i.e. Hecate), a demon, or even the square itself rotating on its TENET spokes, thus giving a peasant Italian pagan origin with the square as a wind indicator.[1][2]

Some academics such as Swiss archeologist Waldemar Deonna (fr) have proposed that it is a numerical number square, which would also imply a Semitic origin.[1] A significant issue is that the square is in Latin, and Romans did not have the ciphered number system of the Greeks or the Semites. However, if the letters are transliterated to Greek,

and then assigned ciphered numbers, the word TENET can be rendered as 666, the number of the beast.[1] Walter O. Moeller analyzed the resultant numerical combinations to assert that the square was made by Mithraic numerologists.[1][30] In 1925, Zatzman interpreted the square as a Hebraic or Aramaic apotropaic formula against the devil, and translated the square to read: "Satan Adama Tabat Amada Natas".[1]

In 1958, French historian Paul-Louis Couchoud proposed a novel interpretation as the square being a device for working out wind directions.[1]

Magical and medical associations

In 2003, Rose Mary Sheldon noted: "Long after the fall of Rome, and long after the general public had forgotten about classical word games, the square survived among people who might not even read Latin. They continued to use it as a charm against illness, evil and bad luck. By the end of the Middle Ages, the 'prophylactic magic' of the square was firmly established in the superstition of Italy, Serbia, Germany, and Iceland, and eventually even crossed to North America".[1] The square appears in versions of several popular magical manuscripts from the early and late Middle Ages, magical text such as the *Tabula Smaragdina* and the *Clavicula Salomonis*. [32]

Medieval German Sator square fire disks

Oberhausmuseum

State and City Library, Augsburg

In Germany in the Middle Ages, the square was inscribed on disks that were then thrown into fires to extinguish them.[1] An edict in 1743 by Duke Ernest Auguste of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach required all settlements to make Sator square disks to combat fires.[1] By the fifteenth century the square was being used as a touchstone against fire at the Château de Chinon and Château de Jarnac (fr) in France.[10]

The square appears as a remedy during labour in the twelfth-century Latin medical text the *Trotula*, [33] and was widely cited as a cure for dog bites and rabies in medieval Europe; [1] in both cases, the remedy/cure is administered by eating bread inscribed with the words of the square. [1][33] By the sixteenth century, the use of the square to cure insanity and fever was being documented in books such as *De Varia Quercus Historia* (1555) by Jean du Choul, and *De Rerum Varietate* (1557) by Gerolamo Cardano. Jean du Choul describes a case where a person from Lyon recovered from insanity after eating three crusts of bread inscribed with the square. [10] After the meal, the person then recited five paternosters for the five wounds of Christ, linking to the Christian imagery believed encoded into the square. [10]

The Long Lost Friend (1820) [34]

Scholars have found medieval Sator-based charms, remedies, and cures, for a diverse range of applications from childbirth, to toothaches, to love potions, to ways of warding off evil spells, and even to determine whether someone was a witch. [1] Richard

Cavendish notes a medieval manuscript in the Bodleian says: "Write these [five sator] words on in parchment with the blood of a Culver [pigeon] and bear it in thy left hand and ask what thou wilt and thou shalt have it. fiat." [35] Other examples include Bosnia, where the square was used as a remedy for aquaphobia, and in Iceland, it was etched into the fingernails to cure jaundice. [1]

There are examples from the nineteenth century in South America, where the Sator square was used as a cure for dog bites and snake-bites in Brazil, [1] and in enclaves of German settlers (or mountain whites) in the Allegheny Mountains who used the square to prevent fire, stop fits, and prevent miscarriages. [1] The Sator square features in eighteenth-century books on Pow-wow folk medicine of the Pennsylvania Dutch, such as *The Long Lost Friend* (see image). [34]

Notable examples

Roman

The oldest Sator square was found in November 1936, in ROTAS form, etched into column number LXI at the Palestra Grande (it) near the amphitheatre of Pompeii (CIL IV 8623). Graffiti associated with the particular columns predates the AD 62 Pompeii earthquake, [a] [14] [15] making it the oldest known square. It also has additional graffiti just below it, with the words SAUTRAN and VALE (CIL IV 8622a-b). [1] [10]

Another Sator square was also found in October 1925, in ROTAS form, etched onto the wall in a bathroom of the house of Publius Paquius Proculus (Reg I, Ins 7, 1), also at Pompeii (CIL IV 8123). The style of the house, which is associated with Nero's reign, dated the square to between AD 50 and AD 79 (the destruction of the city). [1] [10] [15]

A Sator square was found in 1954, in ROTAS form, etched onto a roof tile of the second-century Roman Imperial governor's house for Pannonia Inferior at Aquincum, near Budapest, Hungary. There has been debate over whether a second partial inscription found beside the square is part of the Roma-Amor palindrome (thus affirming the Roman puzzle origin theory), but it seems unlikely. [10] [15]

Roman second-century ROTAS-form squares

Cirencester, England

Manchester, England

Conímbriga Portugal

A Sator square was found in 1978, in ROTAS form, etched on a fragment of Roman pottery at a Roman site at Manchester that was dated circa AD 185. [14]

Four Sator squares were found in 1931–32, all in ROTAS form, etched on the walls of military buildings, at Dura-Europos in Syria, dated circa AD 200. [1] [10] [14] [15]

A Sator square was found in 1868, in ROTAS form, scratched onto a plaster wall in the Roman Britain settlement of Corinium Dobunnorum at Cirencester. [14] [15]

A Sator square was found in 1971, in ROTAS form, etched onto an unfired brick at the Roman city of Conímbriga in Portugal that was dated from the second century. [15]

A Sator square was found in 1966–71, in ROTAS form, scratched into a Roman-era wall

during excavations of the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (along with the Roma-Amor, and the Rome Summus Amor palindromes).[26]

Early medieval

Examples of Coptic Sator square amulets, Papyrus Museum, Vienna

The earliest Sator square post-Roman times was the 1899 discovery of a ROTAS-form square inscribed on a Coptic papyrus by German historians Adolph Erman and Fritz Krebs in the Berlin Papyrus Collection of the Berlin State Museums (then the Königlichen Museen); it has no other explicit Christian imagery.[1][13]

The earliest Sator square with explicit additional Christian imagery is a sixth-century bronze amulet from Asia Minor that has two fish turned toward one another on one side, and a Sator square in Greek characters in a checkerboard pattern on the other side. Written above the square is the word "ICHTHUS", which directly translates as a term for Christ. It is also in the Berlin State Museums.[b][1]

One of the earliest examples of a Sator square in a Christian church is the SATOR-form marble square on the facade of the circa AD 752 Benedictine Abbey of St Peter ad Oratorium, near Capistrano, in Italy.[1]

The earliest example from France is a SATOR-form square found in a Carolingian Bible from AD 822 at the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.[1][10] There are ninth- to tenth-century examples in Codex 384 from Monte Cassino, and a square was found written into the margin of a work titled Versus de cavenda Venere et vino found, which is part of Codex 1.4 of the Capitolare di Modena.[1]

One of the earliest examples of the square being applied to medical beliefs is from the twelfth-century Latin medical textbooks the Trotula, where the translated text advises: "[98] Or let these names be written on cheese and butter: + sa. e. op. ab. z. po. c. zy. e pe. pa. pu c. ac. sator arepo tenet os pera rotas and let them be given to eat".[33] In a similar vein, a thirteenth-century parchment from Aurillac offers a Sator-square chant for women in childbirth.[10]

Later medieval

Samson and the Lion. A twelfth-century mosaic with the words of the square in a circle, Collegiate church of Saint Ursus, Aosta, Italy

Twelfth-century French examples are found on the wall of the Eglise Saint Laurent at Château de Rochemaure (fr), and in the keep of Château de Loches.[1][10]

A Sator square in SATOR form was found on a block set into the doorway facade of a fortified wall in the largely abandoned medieval fortress town of Oppède-le-Vieux, in France's Luberon; the old town itself dates from the twelfth or thirteenth century and was abandoned by the seventeenth century.[7]

Many medieval Italian towns and churches have squares. The twelfth-century church of San Giovanni Decolatto in Pieve Terzagni in Cremona has fragments of a floor mosaic that included a square.[1] Valvisciolo Abbey has letters forming five concentric rings, each one divided into five sectors. One appears on the exterior wall of the Duomo in Siena. Inside the church of Acquaviva Collecroce is a stone with the square in a ROTAS form. Others include the church of the Pieve of San Giovanni, the Collegiate church of Saint Ursus, the Cathedral of Ascoli Satriano, and the Church of San Lorenzo in

Paggesse in Marche.[7]

The square is found in diverse locations all over later medieval France, including fifteenth-century examples at the Château de Chinon, the Château de Jarnac (fr), as well as in the courthouse in Valbonnais.[10]

A Sator square in SATOR form is in the medieval Rivington Church in Lancashire, England.[36]

The phrase appears on the rune stone Näs Fv1979;234 from Närke, Sweden, dated to the fourteenth century. It reads "sator arepo tenet" (untranscribed: "sator ¶ ar(æ)po ¶ tænaet").[37] It also occurs in two inscriptions from Gotland (G 145 M and G 149 M), which contain the whole palindrome.[37]

Other

Lady Jane Francesa Wilde's anthology of Irish folklore, *Ancient Legends Mystic Charms & Superstitions of Ireland* (1888), includes the tale of a young girl who is enchanted by a poet using the spell of a Sator square written on a piece of paper in blood.[38]

The Sator square, with some letters changed, features in eighteenth-century books on Pow-wow folk medicine of the Pennsylvania Dutch, such as *The Long Lost Friend* (see image earlier).

In popular culture

Filippo Balbi (circa 1860)

The Sator square has inspired many works in the arts, including some classical and contemporary composers such as works by Austrian composer Anton Webern and Italian composer Fabio Mengozzi,[39] writers such as Brazilian writer Osman Lins (whose novel *Avalovara* (1973) follows the structure of the square), and painters such as American artist Dick Higgins with *La Melancolia* (1983),[5] and American artist Gary Stephan with *Sator Arepo Tenet Opera Rotas* (1982).[40]

Director Christopher Nolan's 2020 film *Tenet* has a story structure that mimics the square's concept of interlinked multiple directions of meaning, and incorporates all five of the names from the Sator square:[7]

The main antagonist is named Sator.[7]

The artist who created the forged Goya drawings was named Arepo.[7]

Tenet is the title of the film as well as the secret organization that works to save the world.[7]

The opening scene is set at an opera house.[7]

Sator owns a construction company called Rotas.[7]

American author Lawrence Watt-Evans notes that Sir Terry Pratchett named the main square in the fictional city of Ankh-Morpork "Sator Square", in a deliberate reference to the symbol. Watt-Evans notes that the *Discworld* series is full of other incidental references to unusual symbols and concepts.[41]

See also

Abracadabra, a second-century Roman magic word

Abraxas, a mystical word in Gnosticism

Nipson anomēmata mē monan opsin, a fourth-century Byzantine palindrome

Paser Crossword Stela

The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, a medieval book that contains word squares

Notes

Work by Italian archaeologist Amedeo Maiuri in 1938 showed that graffito on the Pompeii palestra square column associated with the Rotas square were linked to graffito that would have predated the earthquake of AD 62; this was later confirmed by German classical philologist Friedrich Focke (de) in 1948 based on an analysis of the stucco plastering of the specific palestra square columns.[14][15]

The fourth- or fifth-century Coptic papyrus with a Sator square had no evidence of any Christian associations or Christian imagery; it would be another two centuries before the first Sator squares appeared that had additional Christian imagery that would definitively associate them as Christian.[1]

Duncan Fishwick showed that this translation into plough was based on a "faulty knowledge of Latin, if not of Greek", [10] and Fishwick's view was reinforced by French historian Robert Étienne.[15]

Most notable and impactful of the three was German priest Felix Grosser, who published in 1926; [2] German historian Christian Frank (de) published in 1924, and Swedish historian Sigurd Agrell published in 1927.[1]

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External links

Wikimedia Commons has media related to Sator Arepo Tenet Opera Rotas.

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Scholia has a profile for Sator Square (Q41898).

An Early Christian Cryptogram? Archived 2 August 2010 at the Wayback Machine

Duncan Fishwick, University of St. Michael's College (1959)

The "Magic Square" in Conimbriga (Portugal) Robert Étienne, University of Coimbra (1978)

Square found in 1936 in the Palestra Grande on column (Il 7), Parco Archeologico di Pompei, inv. 20565 (2023)

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This category has the following 5 subcategories, out of 5 total.

C
Children's books about magic (3 C, 42 P)
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Grimoires (4 C, 26 P)
W
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Witchcraft treatises (1 C, 21 P)
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0–9

777 and Other Qabalistic Writings of Aleister Crowley

A

The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual

Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic

B

The Blue Equinox

The Book of Abramelin

The Book of Ceremonial Magic

The Book of Lies (Crowley)

Book of Magical Charms

The Book of Pleasure

Book of Saint Cyprian

Book of Shadows

Book of Soyga

Books of secrets

C

Coptic magical papyri

Coral Gardens and Their Magic

Cosmic Trigger trilogy

D

Daemonologie

Dark Star Rising

De mirabilibus mundi (Pseudo-Albert)

De praestigiis daemonum

Dictionary of Occult, Hermetic and Alchemical Sigils

The Discoverie of Witchcraft

Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie

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E

Earth Inferno

The Equinox

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Greek Magical Papyri

A Guide to Grand-Jury Men

H

The Holy Books of Thelema

I

Initiation Into Hermetics

J

Jewish magical papyri

K

Key of Solomon

Konx Om Pax

L

The Lesser Key of Solomon

Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft

Liber Pennae Praenumbra

Lithobolia

Lives of the Necromancers

M

Maat Magick

Magia Naturalis

Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays

Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld

Magic: History, Theory, Practice

The Magical Revival

Magick (Book 4)

Magick Without Tears

The Magus (Barrett book)

Man, Myth & Magic (encyclopedia)

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Munich Manual of Demonic Magic

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O

Oriental Magic

P

The Perfect Matrimony

Petit Albert

Pustaha

R

A Republic of Mind and Spirit

Rites of Eleusis

Rites of the Gods

S

Saducismus Triumphatus

The Secret Lore of Magic

Secretum Secretorum

Sex, Drugs and Magick
Some Spirits Heal, Others Only Dance
Spirits, Stars, and Spells
The Synagogue of Satan

T

The Triangular Book of St. Germain

Traité sur les apparitions des esprits et sur les vampires ou les revenans de Hongrie, de Moravie, &c.

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AI Overview

Advaita Vedanta is a prominent Hindu philosophical tradition emphasizing non-duality (Advaita), asserting that the individual soul (Atman) is identical to the ultimate reality (Brahman) and that the perceived world of separate objects and selves is an illusion (Maya), ultimately unreal from the absolute perspective. Championed by Adi Shankara,

it seeks self-realization through practices like listening (Shravana), contemplation (Manana), and meditation (Nididhyasana) to recognize this oneness, leading to liberation (Moksha) from suffering.

Core Concepts

Brahman: The single, ultimate, unchanging reality, pure consciousness.

Atman: The individual self or soul, which is identical to Brahman.

Maya: The cosmic illusion that makes the one Brahman appear as the manifold world and individual selves.

Jiva (Individuality): Appears real due to ignorance (avidya) but is ultimately illusory, a projection of Brahman.

Nirguna Brahman: Brahman without attributes (formless, unconditioned).

Saguna Brahman: Brahman with attributes, worshipped as God (like Isvara) for devotional purposes.

Key Teachings

"Tat Tvam Asi" (Thou Art That): A core Vedic teaching signifying the direct identity between the individual self (you) and the ultimate reality (That/Brahman).

Three Levels of Reality: Subjective (Pratibhasika), empirical (Vyavaharika), and ultimate (Paramarthika).

Non-Duality of Brahman: Brahman has no internal divisions, similarities, or dissimilarities; it is a homogenous, partless reality.

Path to Liberation (Moksha)

Shravana: Listening to the teachings from a qualified teacher (Guru).

Manana: Contemplating and reasoning about the teachings to remove doubts.

Nididhyasana: Meditating on the truth until it becomes a direct, lived experience, realizing one's true nature as Brahman.

Historical Context

Rooted in the Upanishads, its systematic development is attributed to figures like Gaudapada, Mandana Misra, and most notably, Adi Shankara (8th-9th century CE).

It's one of the six orthodox (Āstika) Hindu philosophies (darśanas).

Can anyone tell me what Advaita Vedanta exactly is? - Reddit

Sep 15, 2024 — Brahman in Advaita Vedanta is considered Nirguna (without attributes or form), meaning it cannot be limited by any one...

Reddit ·

r/AdvaitaVedanta

Advaita Vedanta - Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

The appearance of plurality arises from a natural state of confusion or ignorance (avidya), inherent in most biological entities.

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Shankara & Advaita Vedanta

Feb 14, 2021 — all is the brahmana. there is nothing which is not the brahmana. the one brahman is the very reality of the world that...

YouTube ·
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Advaita Vedanta

Wikipedia
[https://en.wikipedia.org › wiki › Advaita_Vedanta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advaita_Vedanta)
Advaita Vedānta is a Hindu tradition of Brahmanical textual exegesis and philosophy, and a monastic institutional tradition
People also ask
What is Advaita Vedanta in simple words?
What are the 4 principles of Advaita Vedanta?
Does Advaita Vedanta believe in God?
Is the Bhagavad Gita dvaita or Advaita?
Feedback
Advaita Vedanta

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
[https://iep.utm.edu › advaita-vedanta](https://iep.utm.edu/advaita-vedanta)
Advaita Vedānta is one version of Vedānta. Vedānta is nominally a school of Indian philosophy, although in reality it is a label for any hermeneutics.
History of Advaita Vedānta
Metaphysics and Philosophy
Epistemology
Can anyone tell me what Advaita Vedanta exactly is?

Reddit · r/AdvaitaVedanta
10+ comments · 1 year ago
In more general terms, we can define Advaita Vedanta as a means of knowledge that explains consciousness and removes a sense of limitation.
14 answers

.

Top answer:
It is the concept of non duality: that you and god is not seperate. You are god. In other ...
Why do not all Hindus follow the path of Advaita ...
174 answers
Jul 9, 2024
What is the Advaita philosophy and why does ...
76 answers
Apr 26, 2024

More results from www.reddit.com

What people are saying

Why is it often claimed that Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta reach the same final truth?

Popular comment · Why is it often claimed that Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta reach the same final truth? Greg Goode, who teaches both Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist Madhyamaka wrote about this once: I wrote this yesterday for the Dharma Connection group, and maybe it's relevant here too (it has some edits for this group). It's in response to someone who was claiming that all paths, including Advaita and Madhyamika, truly lead to the same truth, the same realization. Sometimes when people confront a lot of different paths, they get a sense of cognitive dissonance. They feel like they have to make that tension go away by landing on a judgment about paths or goals as truly "the same" or "different." But how can that really be? So, about Advaita and Madhyamika.....

We can certainly say that they share an overall soteriological goal: freedom from suffering, happiness, compassion, love. The heart wants to say "SAME" here. That's understandable, and I feel that deeply. But beyond that, the mechanics, concepts, and languaging are very different, even on the surface. Something [edited out name] said makes a lot of sense, and it has extremely radical consequences: "Certain views lead to certain realizations. Other views lead to other realizations. Realization is dependent on view." If realizations can affect views, then views can affect realizations. The views of Advaita and Madhyamika are quite different. In fact, Madhyamika owes much of its presentation to the rejection of essential nature and absolute truth that Advaita proposes. The two paths could not be more different on this. Even the "ultimate truth" in Buddhism does not map to the Absolute Truth in Advaita, though there has been a perennialist effort to combine the two into a master Vedantic meta-view for about a century. Perennialism began as long ago as the 15th century with Neoplatonism, and was appropriated by Christian exclusivism. In the last century we've seen Swami Vivekananda, Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Madame Blavatsky, Aldous Huxley, and the New Age movement opt for "inherent sameness." The resulting view is much more Advaita-like than Buddhist-like, which corresponds with the favored view of the perennialist proponents most of the time. The Buddhist side would not insist on either "inherently same" or "inherently different." The Buddhists would be more like, "You do your thing, we'll do ours. Let's just all be kind to each other." I even remember hearing a story about the Dalai Lama giving emptiness teachings. Someone in the audience asked him, "What about Brahman and all the Vedantins who study that? Are you saying that emptiness is true and Brahman is mistaken?" He thought for a moment and replied, "Brahman – that is their business. Emptiness – that is our business." So I think it is not helpful to try to stand in a neutral place and compare the truths or the metaphysics of these teachings. We can't do it. Where would we find a neutral place? We can give a Madhyamika interpretation of Advaita or an Advaitin interpretation of Madhyamika. Or a comparative religion-style story about them. Or an everyday psychological assessment of both paths, if we have had experiences in both. But to try to give a metaphysical comparison and ordering and ranking of views from a place that is "neutral" or "impartial" or "unaffected by views" cannot be done. Comparisons and ordering and ranking and assessments are never neutral, but always themselves dependent upon certain standards. And standards are dependent upon

views. It SEEMS possible to do make these assessments neutrally, but that's only if we are blind to the emptiness of view, blind to how our conceptual or experiential assessment is already conceptually implicated in some view or another. In my experience reading so many of these essays and posts, the comparative efforts usually (not always) tend to favor the perennialist view, resulting in a kind of projection and imperialism of the "mine."

.

60+ comments · 1 month ago

r/Buddhism
Reddit

We have lost faith in ourselves. Therefore to preach the Advaita aspect of the Vedanta is necessary to rouse up the hearts of men, to show them the glory of their souls. It is, therefore, that I preach this Advaita; and I do so not as a sectarian, but upon universal a
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19:10

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Advaita Vedanta enthusiast

An Advantage of Advaita Vedanta vis-a-vis Mahayana Buddhism

Popular comment · I have explored both. In my opinion, you are missing the reason why the Buddhists are hesitant to accept any permanent transcendental existence. It's because of their doctrine of emptiness, which lends to their doctrine of dependent arising. For this reason, the concept of the Buddha Mind is controversial and often expressed hesitantly. Meanwhile Vedanta is direct in its assertion. Sarvam kalvidam brahma.

.

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0:58

Advaita Must Be Lived, Not Theorized Discover how the non-dual consciousness isn't confined to meditation. Learn to live and radiate oneness in every aspect of your life.
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srinithyananda · Instagram

Supreme Pontiff of Hinduism

In Advaita Vedanta, what exactly is Brahman — is it pure consciousness, pure being, or something beyond both?

Popular comment · Being (sat) and consciousness (cit) are identical in Advaita. So what is called Brahman is that supreme or pure consciousness. Existence itself.

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Reddit

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Adi Shankara, the most prominent exponent of Advaita Vedānta tradition.

"I am other than name, form and action.

My nature is ever free!

I am Self, the supreme unconditioned Brahman.

I am pure Awareness, always non-dual."

Adi Shankara, Upadesasahasri 11.7[1]

Advaita Vedānta (/ˈʌdˈvɑːtə vɛˈdɑːntə/; Sanskrit: अद्वैत वेदान्त, IAST: Advaita Vedānta) is a Hindu tradition of Brahmanical textual exegesis and philosophy, and a monastic institutional tradition nominally related to the Daśanāmi Sampradaya and propagated by the Smārta tradition. Its core tenet is that jivatman, the individual experiencing self, is ultimately pure awareness mistakenly identified with the body and its senses[2] and with thought-constructs,[3] and non-different from Ātman/Brahman, the highest Self or Reality.[4][5][6][note 1] The term Advaita (अद्वैत) literally means "not-two"[7][8] or "one without a second,"[8] which means that only Brahman, 'the one', is ultimately real while prapañca, 'the second', 'the world' or the multiplicity of thought-constructs, is not fully real.[9] It is commonly rendered as "nonduality,"[10][11] and popularly interpreted as meaning that Atman is non-different from Brahman, and often equated with monism. [note 2]

Advaita Vedānta is a Hindu sādhanā, a path of spiritual discipline and experience.[note 3] It states that moksha (liberation from 'suffering' and rebirth)[12][13] is attained through knowledge of Brahman, recognizing the illusoriness of the phenomenal world and disidentification from body-mind and the notion of 'doership',[note 4] and by acquiring vidyā (knowledge)[14] of one's true identity as Atman/Brahman,[1][15][16][17] self-luminous (svayam prakāśa)[note 5] awareness or Witness-consciousness.[18][note 6]

This knowledge is acquired through Upanishadic statements such as *tat tvam asi*, "that['s how] you are," which destroy the ignorance (*avidyā*) regarding one's true identity by revealing that (*jiv*)Ātman is non-different from immortal[note 7] Brahman.[note 1]

The Advaita vedanta tradition modifies the Samkhya-dualism between Purusha (pure awareness or consciousness) and Prakriti ('nature', which includes matter but also cognition and emotion) as the two equal basic principles of existence.[19][20] It proposes instead that Atman/Brahman (awareness, purusha) alone is ultimately real and, though unchanging,[21] is the cause and origin of the transient phenomenal world (*prakriti*). In this view, the *jivatman* or individual self is a mere reflection or limitation of singular Ātman in a multitude of apparent individual bodies.[22] It regards the material world as an illusory appearance (*maya*) or "an unreal manifestation (*vivarta*) of Brahman,"[23] the latter as proposed by the 13th century scholar Prakasatman of the Vivarana school.[24]

Advaita Vedanta is often presented as an elite scholarly tradition belonging to the orthodox Hindu Vedānta[note 8] tradition, emphasizing scholarly works written in Sanskrit;[25] as such, it is an "iconic representation of Hindu religion and culture." [26] Yet contemporary Advaita Vedanta is yogic Advaita, a medieval and modern syncretic tradition incorporating Yoga and other traditions, and producing works in vernacular.[25] The earliest Advaita writings are the Sannyasa Upanishads (first centuries CE), the *Vākyapadīya*, written by Bhartṛhari (second half 5th century,[27]) and the *Māndūkya-kārikā* written by Gauḍapāda (7th century).[28] Gaudapada adapted philosophical concepts from Buddhism, giving them a Vedantic basis and interpretation.[29] The Buddhist concepts were further Vedanticised by Adi Shankara (8th c. CE), who is generally regarded as the most prominent exponent of the Advaita Vedānta tradition,[30] [31][32][33] though some of the most prominent Advaita-propositions come from other Advaitins, and his early influence has been questioned.[34][35][note 9] Adi Shankara emphasized that, since Brahman is ever-present, Brahman-knowledge is immediate and requires no 'action' or 'doership', that is, striving (to attain) and effort.[36][37][38] Nevertheless, the Advaita tradition, as represented by Mandana Misra and the Bhamati school, also prescribes elaborate preparatory practice, including contemplation of mahavakyas,[37][39][40][41][note 9] presenting a tension between sudden and gradual approaches which is also recognized in other spiritual disciplines and traditions.[37][42] [note 10]

Sri Shankaracharya, also known as Adi Shankara, was an important Indian philosopher and spiritual teacher who actively promoted Advaita Vedanta. His teachings on non-duality and the unity of all things have had a significant impact on Indian philosophy and spirituality.

Shankaracharya's prominence as the exemplary defender of traditional Hindu-values and spirituality started to take shape only centuries later, in the 14th century, with the ascent of Sringeri matha and its jagadguru Vidyaranya (Madhava, 14th cent.) in the Vijayanagara Empire,[note 11] While Adi Shankara did not embrace Yoga,[43] the

Advaita-tradition by then had accepted yogic samadhi as a means to still the mind and attain knowledge, explicitly incorporating elements from the yogic tradition and texts like the Yoga Vasistha and the Bhagavata Purana,[44] culminating in Swami Vivekananda's full embrace and propagation of Yogic samadhi as an Advaita means of knowledge and liberation.[45][46] In the 19th century, due to the influence of Vidyanaraya's Sarvadarśanasāṅgraha,[47] the importance of Advaita Vedānta was overemphasized by Western scholarship,[48] and Advaita Vedānta came to be regarded as the paradigmatic example of Hindu spirituality, despite the numerical dominance of theistic Bhakti-oriented religiosity.[49][50][48][note 9] In modern times, Advaita views appear in various Neo-Vedānta movements.[51]

Etymology and nomenclature

Etymology

The word Advaita is a composite of two Sanskrit words:

Prefix "a-" (अ), meaning "non-"

"Dvaita" (द्वैत), which means 'duality' or 'dualism'. [web 1]

Advaita is often translated as "non-duality," but a more apt translation is "non-secondness." [4] Fabian Volker, following Paul Hacker explains that dvaita does not mean "duality," but "the state in which a second is present," synonymous with prapanca, "conceptual proliferation," and with jagat, "the world." Advaita thus means that only Brahman, 'the one', is ultimately real, while the world with its multiplicity, 'the second', is not fully real. [9] As Gaudapada states, when the unreal is taken as real, people grasp to the unreal, which is samsara. By realizing one's true identity as Brahman, there is no more grasping, and the mind comes to rest. [52]

In a popular sense, advaita is often expressed as the famous diction that Atman is Brahman, meaning that jivatman, the individual experiencing self, is ultimately pure awareness mistakenly identified with body and the senses, [53] and non-different ("na aparāha") from Ātman/Brahman, the highest Self or Reality; [4][5][6][note 1]; the knowledge of this true identity is liberating.

The word Vedānta is a composition of two Sanskrit words: The word Veda refers to the whole corpus of vedic texts, and the word "anta" means 'end'. From this, one meaning of Vedānta is "the end of the Vedas" or "the ultimate knowledge of the Vedas". Veda can also mean "knowledge" in general, so Vedānta can be taken to mean "the end, conclusion or finality of knowledge". Vedānta is one of six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy.

Advaita Vedanta

While "a preferred terminology" for Upanisadic philosophy "in the early periods, before the time of Shankara" was Puruṣavāda, [54][note 12] the Advaita Vedānta school has historically been referred to by various names, such as Advaita-vada (speaker of Advaita), Abheda-darshana (view of non-difference), Dvaita-vada-pratisedha (denial of

dual distinctions), and Kevala-dvaita (non-dualism of the isolated).[55] It is also called māyāvāda by Vaishnava opponents, akin to Madhyamaka Buddhism, due to their insistence that phenomena ultimately lack an inherent essence or reality.[56][57][58][59]

"Advaita" (अद्वैत) is from Sanskrit roots a, not; dvaita, "customarily translated as dual." [9] As Advaita, it is usually translated as "not-two" [7][8] or "one without a second", [8] and most commonly as "nondualism", "nonduality" or "nondual," invoking the notion of a dichotomy. Fabian Volker, following Paul Hacker explains that dvaita does not mean "duality," but "the state in which a second is present," the second here being synonymous with prapanca, "conceptual proliferation," and with jagat, "the world." Advaita thus means that only Brahman, 'the one', is ultimately real, while the phenomenal world, or the conceptual multiplicity, 'the second', is not fully real. [9] The term thus does not emphasize two instances, but the notion that the second instance is not fully real, and advaita is better translated as "that which has no second beside it" instead of "nonduality," denying multiplicity and the proliferation of concepts "that tend to obscure the true state of affairs." [9][note 13]

According to Richard King, a professor of Buddhist and Asian studies, the term Advaita first occurs in a recognizably Vedantic context in the prose of Mandukya Upanishad. [55] According to Frits Staal, a professor of philosophy specializing in Sanskrit and Vedic studies, the word Advaita itself is from the Vedic era, and the Vedic sage Yajñavalkya (8th or 7th-century BCE [61][62]) is credited to be the one who coined it. [63] Stephen Phillips, a professor of philosophy and Asian studies, translates the Advaita containing verse excerpt in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, as "An ocean, a single seer without duality becomes he whose world is Brahman." [note 15]

Advaita tradition

While the term "Advaita Vedanta" in a strict sense may refer to the scholastic tradition of textual exegesis established by Shankara and the monastic institutions, "advaita" in a broader sense may refer to a broad current of advaitic thought, which incorporates advaitic elements with yogic thought and practice and other strands of Indian religiosity, such as Kashmir Shaivism and the Nath tradition. [65] The first connotation has also been called "Classical Advaita" [33][66] and "doctrinal Advaita," [67] and its presentation as such is due to mediaeval doxographies, [46] the influence of Orientalist Indologists like Paul Deussen, [68] and the Indian response to colonial influences, dubbed neo-Vedanta by Paul Hacker, who regarded it as a deviation from "traditional" Advaita Vedanta. [33] Yet, post-Shankara Advaita Vedanta incorporated yogic elements, such as the Yoga Vasistha, and influenced other Indian traditions, and neo-Vedanta is based on this broader strand of Indian thought. [33] This broader current of thought and practice has also been called "greater Advaita Vedanta," [25] "vernacular advaita," [33] and "experiential Advaita." [67] It is this broader advaitic tradition which is commonly presented as "Advaita Vedanta," though the term "advaitic" may be more apt. [33][note 16]

Monism

See also: Metaphysics and Ontology

The nondualism of Advaita Vedānta is often regarded as an idealist monism.[note 2] According to King, Advaita Vedānta developed "to its ultimate extreme" the monistic ideas already present in the Upanishads.[note 17] In contrast, states Milne, it is misleading to call Advaita Vedānta "monistic," since this confuses the "negation of difference" with "conflation into one." [69] Advaita is a negative term (a-dvaita), states Milne, which denotes the "negation of a difference," between subject and object, or between perceiver and perceived.[69]

According to Deutsch, Advaita Vedānta teaches monistic oneness, however without the multiplicity premise of alternate monism theories.[70] According to Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, Adi Shankara positively emphasizes "oneness" premise in his Brahma-sutra Bhasya 2.1.20, attributing it to all the Upanishads.[71]

Nicholson states Advaita Vedānta contains realistic strands of thought, both in its oldest origins and in Shankara's writings.[72]

Soteriology: moksha – liberating knowledge of Brahman
Knowledge is liberating

Ramana Maharshi, the Indian sage who is widely regarded as a Jivanmukta

See also: Jnana, Prajna, and Prajñānam Brahma

The soteriological goal, in Advaita, is to gain self-knowledge as being in essence (Atman), awareness or witness-consciousness, and complete understanding of the real identity of jivan-ātman as Brahman.[1] Correct knowledge of Atman and Brahman is the attainment of Brahman, immortality,[73] and leads to moksha (liberation) from suffering[note 18] and samsara, the cycle of rebirth.[1] This is stated by Shankara as follows:

I am other than name, form and action.

My nature is ever free!

I am Self, the supreme unconditioned Brahman.

I am pure Awareness, always non-dual.

—Adi Shankara, Upadesasahasri 11.7, [1]

According to Advaita Vedānta, liberation can be achieved while living, and is called Jivanmukti.[74][75][note 19] in contrast to Videhamukti (moksha from samsara after death) in theistic sub-schools of Vedānta.[76][better source needed] The Atman-knowledge, that is the knowledge of true Self and its relationship to Brahman is central to this liberation in Advaita thought.[note 20] Atman-knowledge, to Advaitins, is full awareness that everything is Brahman.[78][79][note 21]

According to Anantanand Rambachan, in Advaita, this state of liberating self-knowledge includes and leads to the understanding that "the self is the self of all, the knower of self

sees the self in all beings and all beings in the self." [80]

Attaining vidyā (knowledge)

Main article: Jnana Yoga

Advaita Vedānta regards the liberated state of being Atman/Brahman as one's true identity and inherent to being human. According to Shankara and the Vivarana-school, no human action can 'produce' this liberated state, as it is what one already is. [37] As Swami Vivekananda stated:

The Vedas cannot show you Brahman, you are That already. They can only help to take away the veil that hides truth from our eyes. The cessation of ignorance can only come when I know that God and I are one; in other words, identify yourself with Atman, not with human limitations. The idea that we are bound is only an illusion [Maya]. Freedom is inseparable from the nature of the Atman. This is ever pure, ever perfect, ever unchangeable.

—Adi Shankara's commentary on Fourth Vyasa Sutra, Swami Vivekananda [81]

According to Shankara, taking a subitist position, [82] moksha is attained at once when the mahavakyas, articulating the identity of Atman and Brahman, are understood. [83] [38] [note 22]

Yet, the Advaita-tradition also emphasizes human effort, a path of Jnana Yoga with a progression of study and training to realize one's true identity as Atman/Brahman and attain moksha. [37] [39] [40] According to the contemporary Advaita tradition, knowledge of Atman/Brahman is obtained gradually, by svādhyāya, study of the self and of the Vedic texts, which consists of four stages of samanyasa: virāga ('renunciation'), sravana ('listening to the teachings of the sages'), manana ('reflection on the teachings') and nididhyāsana, introspection and profound and repeated meditation on the mahavakyas, selected Upanishadic statements such as tat tvam asi ('that art thou' or 'you are That') which are taken literal, and form the srutic evidence for the identity of jivanatman and Atman/Brahman. [84] [85] [web 4] This meditation negates the misconceptions, false knowledge, and false ego-identity, rooted in maya, which obfuscate the ultimate truth of the oneness of Brahman, and one's true identity as Atman/Brahman. [86] This culminates in what Adi Shankara refers to as anubhava, immediate intuition, a direct awareness which is construction-free, and not construction-filled. It is not an awareness of Brahman, but instead an awareness that is Brahman. [87] Although the threefold practice is broadly accepted in the Advaita tradition, and affirmed by Mandana Misra, [88] it is at odds with Shankara, [89] who took a subitist position. [82]

Sruti (scriptures), proper reasoning and meditation are the main sources of knowledge (vidya) for the Advaita Vedānta tradition. [41] [90] [91] It teaches that correct knowledge of Atman and Brahman is achievable by svādhyāya, [92] study of the self and of the Vedic texts, and three stages of practice: sravana (perception, hearing), manana (thinking) and nididhyāsana (meditation), [41] a three-step methodology that is rooted in the teachings of chapter 4 of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. [93] [94]

According to critics of neo-Advaita, which also emphasizes direct insight, traditional Advaita Vedanta entails more than self-inquiry or bare insight into one's real nature, but also includes self-restraint, textual studies and ethical perfection. It is described in classical Advaita books like Shankara's Upadesasahasri[95] and the Vivekachudamani, which is also attributed to Shankara.

Preparation: the fourfold qualities

The Advaita student has to develop the fourfold qualities,[96] or behavioral qualifications (Samanyasa, Sampattis, sādhana-catustaya):[97][98][99][note 23] A student in Advaita Vedānta tradition is required to develop these four qualities:

Nityānitya vastu viveka (नित्यानित्य वस्तु विवेकम्) – Viveka is the ability to correctly discriminate between the real and eternal (nitya) and the substance that is apparently real, illusory, changing and transitory (anitya).[97][84]

Ihāmutrārtha phala bhoga virāga (इहाऽमुत्रार्थ फल भोगविरागम्) – The renunciation (virāga) of all desires of the mind (bhoga) for sense pleasures, in this world (iha) and other worlds. Willing to give up everything that is an obstacle to the pursuit of truth and self-knowledge.[84][100]

Śamādi ṣaṭka sampatti (शमादि षट्क सम्पत्ति) – the sixfold virtues or qualities:

Śama – mental tranquility, ability to focus the mind.[84][100]

Dama – self-restraint,[note 24] the virtue of temperance.[84][100] restraining the senses. Uparati – dispassion, lack of desire for worldly pleasures, ability to be quiet and disassociated from everything;[84] discontinuation of all religious duties and ceremonies[100]

Titikṣa – endurance, perseverance, putting up with pairs of opposites (like heat and cold, pleasure and pain), ability to be patient during demanding circumstances[84][100]

Śraddhā – having faith in teacher and the Sruti scriptural texts[84]

Samādhāna – contentedness, satisfaction of mind in all conditions, attention, intentness of mind[84][100]

Mumukṣutva (मुमुक्षुत्वम्) – An intense longing for freedom, liberation and wisdom, driven to the quest of knowledge and understanding. Having moksha as the primary goal of life[84][96]

The threefold practice: sravana (hearing), manana (thinking) and nididhyasana (meditation)

The Advaita tradition teaches that correct knowledge, which destroys avidya, psychological and perceptual errors related to Atman and Brahman,[16] is obtained in jñānayoga through three stages of practice,[98] sravana (hearing), manana (thinking) and nididhyasana (meditation).[41] This three-step methodology is rooted in the teachings of chapter 4 of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:[93][94]

Sravana, which literally means hearing. The student listens and discusses the ideas, concepts, questions and answers.[41][93] of the sages on the Upanishads and Advaita Vedānta, studying the Vedantic texts, such as the Brahma Sutras, aided by discussions

with the guru (teacher, counsellor).[97][104][41]

Manana refers to thinking on these discussions and contemplating over the various ideas based on svadhyaya and sravana.[93][104][105] It is the stage of reflection on the teachings.[93][104]

Nididhyāsana, the stage of meditation and introspection.[84][web 5] This stage of practice aims at realization and consequent conviction of the truths, non-duality and a state where there is a fusion of thought and action, knowing and being.[106][93]

Although the threefold practice is broadly accepted in the Advaita tradition, Shankara's works show an ambivalence toward it: while accepting its authenticity and merits, as it is based in the scriptures, he also takes a subitist position,[82] arguing that moksha is attained at once when the mahavakyas, articulating the identity of Atman and Brahman, are understood.[83][38][note 25] According to Rambachan, "it is not possible to reconcile Sankara's views with this seemingly well-ordered system."[89]

Mandana Misra, on the other hand, explicitly affirms the threefold practice as the means to acquire knowledge of Brahman, referring to meditation as dhyana.[107] He states that these practices, though conceptual, 'can eliminate both ignorance and conceptuality at the same time, leaving only the "pure, transparent nature" of self-awareness'.[108]

Bilimoria states that these three stages of Advaita practice can be viewed as sadhana practice that unifies Yoga and Karma ("action," referring here to ritual) ideas, and was most likely derived from these older traditions.[109][104]

Guru

Main article: Guru

Advaita Vedānta school has traditionally had a high reverence for a Guru (teacher), and recommends that a competent Guru be sought in one's pursuit of spirituality, though this is not mandatory.[110] Reading of Vedic literature and reflection is the most essential practice.[110] Adi Shankara, states Comans, regularly employed compound words "such as Sastracaryopadesa (instruction by way of the scriptures and the teacher) and Vedāntacaryopadesa (instruction by way of the Upanishads and the teacher) to emphasize the importance of Guru".[110] According to Comans, this reflects the Advaita tradition which holds a competent teacher as important and essential to gaining correct knowledge, freeing oneself from false knowledge, and to self-realization.[111]

Nevertheless, in the Bhamati-school the guru has a less essential role, as he can explain the teachings, but the student has to venture its further study.[112]

A guru is someone more than a teacher, traditionally a reverential figure to the student, with the guru serving as a "counselor, who helps mold values, shares experiential knowledge as much as literal knowledge, an exemplar in life, an inspirational source and who helps in the spiritual evolution of a student.[113] The guru, states Joel Mlecko, is more than someone who teaches specific type of knowledge, and includes in its scope someone who is also a "counselor, a sort of parent of mind and soul, who helps mold values and experiential knowledge as much as specific knowledge, an exemplar in life, an inspirational source and who reveals the meaning of life." [113]

Pramana (means of knowledge)

Main article: Epistemology in Advaita Vedanta

In classical Indian thought, pramana (means of knowledge) concerns questions like how correct knowledge can be acquired; how one knows, how one doesn't; and to what extent knowledge pertinent about someone or something can be acquired.[114][115] In contrast to other schools of Indian philosophy, early Vedanta paid little attention to pramana.[116] The Brahmasutras are not concerned with pramana, and pratyaksa (sense-perception) and anumana (inference) refer there to sruti and smriti respectively. [116] Shankara recognized the means of knowledge,[117][note 26] but his thematic focus was upon metaphysics and soteriology, and he took for granted the pramanas. [122] For Shankara, sabda is the only means of knowledge for attaining Brahman-jnana. [123] According to Sengaku Mayeda, "in no place in his works [...] does he give any systematic account of them,"[122] taking Atman/Brahman to be self-evident (svapramanaka) and self-established (svatahsiddha), and "an investigation of the means of knowledge is of no use for the attainment of final release." [122]

Nevertheless, the Advaita tradition accepts altogether six kinds of pramāṇas.[124][125] [126][123] While Adi Shankara emphasized Śabda (शब्द), relying on word, testimony of past or present reliable experts with regard to religious insights,[115][127][124][128] and also accepted pratyakṣa (प्रत्यक्षाय), perception; and anumāṇa (अनुमान), inference; classical Advaita Vedānta, just like the Bhatta Purvamimamsaka school, also accepts upamāṇa (उपमान), comparison, analogy; arthāpatti (अर्थापत्ति), postulation, derivation from circumstances;[115][129] and anupalabdhi (अनुपलब्धि), non-perception, negative/cognitive proof.[127][124]

Samadhi

According to Dubois, Shankara's Advaita emphasizes that, since Brahman is ever-present, Brahman-knowledge is immediate and requires no 'action', that is, striving and effort;[36] yet, the contemporary Advaita tradition, which is a yogic Advaita synthesis which developed in the late mediaeval period, also prescribes elaborate preparatory practice, including yogic samadhi, posing a paradox which is also recognized in other spiritual disciplines and traditions.[130][42][note 10]

Shankara regarded the srutis as the means of knowledge of Brahman, and he was ambivalent about yogic practices and meditation, which at best may prepare one for Brahma-jnana.[web 6] According to Rambachan, criticising Vivekananda, Shankara states that the knowledge of Brahman can only be obtained from inquiry of the Shruti, and not by Yoga or samadhi, which at best can only silence the mind.[131] The Bhamati school and the Vivarana school differed on the role of contemplation, but they both "deny the possibility of perceiving supersensuous knowledge through popular yoga techniques." [132] Later Advaita texts like the Dṛg-Dṛśya-Viveka (14th century) and Vedāntasara (of Sadananda) (15th century) added samādhi as a means to liberation, a theme that was also emphasized by Swami Vivekananda.[44] The Vivekachudamani,

traditionally attributed to Shankara but post-dating him,[133] "conceives of nirvikalpa samadhi as the premier method of Self-realization over and above the well-known vedantic discipline of listening, reflection and deep contemplation." [65] Koller states that yogic concentration is an aid to gaining knowledge in Advaita.[134]

Anubhava ('experience')

The role of anubhava, anubhuti ("experience," "intuition"[135]) as "experience" in gaining Brahman-jnana is contested. While neo-Vedanta claims a central position for anubhava as "experience," Shankara himself regarded reliance on textual authority as sufficient for gaining Brahman-jnana,[136][note 27] "the intuition of Brahman,"[135] and used anubhava interchangeably with pratipatta, "understanding".[137] Arvind Sharma argues that Shankara's own "direct experience of the ultimate truth" guided him in selecting "those passages of the scriptures that resonate with this experience and will select them as the key with which to open previously closed, even forbidden, doors." [138][note 28]

The Vivekachudamani "explicit[ly] declar[es] that experience (anubhuti) is a pramana, or means of knowing (VCM 59)," [65] and neo-Vedanta also accepts anubhava ("personal experience") as a means of knowledge.[139] Dalal and others state that anubhava does not center around some sort of "mystical experience," but around the correct knowledge of Brahman.[91][140] Nikhalananda concurs, stating that (knowledge of) Atman and Brahman can only be reached by buddhi, "reason," [141] stating that mysticism is a kind of intuitive knowledge, while buddhi is the highest means of attaining knowledge.[142]

Adhyaropa Apavada - imposition and negation

See also: Neti Neti

Since Gaudapada,[143] who adopted the Buddhist four-cornered negation which negates any positive predicates of 'the Absolute',[144][145][note 29] a central method in Advaita Vedanta to express the inexpressable is the method called Adhyaropa Apavada. [143] In this method, which was highly estimated by Satchidanandendra Saraswati, a property is imposed (adhyaropa) on Atman to convince one of its existence, whereafter the imposition is removed (apavada) to reveal the true nature of Atman as nondual and undefinable.[147] In this method, "That which cannot be expressed is expressed through false attribution and subsequent denial." [148] As Shankara writes, "First let me bring them on the right path, and then I will gradually be able to bring them round to the final truth afterwards." [148] For example, Atman, the real "I," is described as witness, giving "it" an attribute to separate it from non-self. Since this implies a duality between observer and observed, next the notion of "witness" is dropped, by showing that the Self cannot be seen and is beyond qualifications, and only that what is remains, without using any words:[web 7]

After one separates oneself i.e. 'I' or Atman from the sense objects, the qualities superimposed on Self are also negated by saying that which not being and not non-being, cannot be described by words, without beginning and end (BG 13.32) or as in Satyam Jnanam Anantam Brahman, beyond words, beyond mind and speech, etc. Here there is an attempt to negate the earlier attribute like being witness, bliss, most subtlest,

etc. After this negation of false superimposition, Self Alone shines. One enters into the state of Nirvikalp Samadhi, where there is no second, no one to experience and hence this state cannot be described in words.[web 7]

The Mahavakyas - the identity of Ātman and Brahman

Moksha, liberation from suffering and rebirth and attaining immortality, is attained by disidentification from the body-mind complex and gaining self-knowledge as being in essence Atman, and attaining knowledge of the identity of Atman and Brahman.[1][73] According to Shankara, the individual Ātman and Brahman seem different at the empirical level of reality, but this difference is only an illusion, and at the highest level of reality they are really identical.[149] The real self is Sat, "the Existent," that is, Atman/Brahman.[150][151][note 1] Whereas the difference between Atman and non-Atman is deemed self-evident, knowledge of the identity of Atman and Brahman is revealed by the shruti, especially the Upanishadic statement tat tvam asi.

Mahavakyas

According to Shankara, a large number of Upanishadic statements reveal the identity of Atman and Brahman. In the Advaita Vedanta tradition, four of those statements, the Mahavakyas, which are taken literal, in contrast to other statements, have a special importance in revealing this identity.[86][152] They are:

तत्त्वमसि, tat tvam asi, Chandogya VI.8.7. Traditionally rendered as "That Thou Art" (that you are),[153][154][155] with tat in Ch.U.6.8.7 referring to sat, "the Existent"[156][19][157]; correctly translated as "That's how [thus] you are,"[153][155][158] with tat in Ch.U.6.12.3, its original location from where it was copied to other verses,[153] referring to "the very nature of all existence as permeated by [the finest essence]"[159][160] अहं ब्रह्मास्मि, aham brahmāsmi, Brhadāranyaka I.4.10, "I am Brahman," or "I am Divine." [161]

प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म, prajñānam brahma, Aitareya V.3, "Prajñānam[note 30] is Brahman." [note 31] अयमात्मा ब्रह्म, ayamātmā brahma, Mandukya II, "This Atman is Brahman."

That you are

The longest chapter of Shankara's Upadesasahasri, chapter 18, "That Art Thou," is devoted to considerations on the insight "I am ever-free, the existent" (sat), and the identity expressed in Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 in the mahavakya (great sentence) "tat tvam asi", "that thou art." [164][165] In this statement, according to Shankara, tat refers to 'Sat,[165] "the Existent"[156][19][166][167] Existence, Being,[web 9] or Brahman,[168] the Real, the "Root of the world,"[165][note 32] the true essence or root or origin of everything that exists.[19][166][web 9] "Tvam" refers to one's real I, pratyagatman or inner Self,[169] the "direct Witness within everything,"[18] "free from caste, family, and purifying ceremonies,"[170] the essence, Atman, which the individual at the core is.[171][172] As Shankara states in the Upadesasahasri:

Up.I.174: "Through such sentences as "Thou art That" one knows one's own Atman, the Witness of all the internal organs." Up.I.18.190: "Through such sentences as "[Thou art]

the Existent" [...] right knowledge concerning the inner Atman will become clearer." Up.I.18.193-194: "In the sentence "Thou art That" [...] [t]he word "That" means inner Atman."[173]

The statement "tat tvam asi" sheds the false notion that Atman is different from Brahman.[174] According to Nakamura, the non-duality of atman and Brahman "is a famous characteristic of Sankara's thought, but it was already taught by Sundarapandya"[175] (c.600 CE or earlier).[176] Shankara cites Sundarapandya in his comments to Brahma Sutra verse I.1.4:

When the metaphorical or false atman is non-existent, [the ideas of my] child, [my] body are sublated. Therefore, when it is realized that 'I am the existent Brahman, atman', how can any duty exist?[177]

From this, and a large number of other accordances, Nakamura concludes that Shankara was not an original thinker, but "a synthesizer of existing Advaita and the rejuvenator, as well as a defender, of ancient learning."[178]

Direct perception versus contemplation of the Mahavakyas

In the Upadesasahasri Shankara, Shankara is ambivalent on the need for meditation on the Upanishadic mahavakya. He states that "right knowledge arises at the moment of hearing,"[38] and rejects prasamcaksa or prasamkhyana meditation, that is, meditation on the meaning of the sentences, and in Up.II.3 recommends parisamkhyana,[179] separating Atman from everything that is not Atman, that is, the sense-objects and sense-organs, and the pleasant and unpleasant things and merit and demerit connected with them.[180] Yet, Shankara then concludes with declaring that only Atman exists, stating that "all the sentences of the Upanishads concerning non-duality of Atman should be fully contemplated, should be contemplated."[181] As Mayeda states, "how they [prasamcaksa or prasamkhyana versus parisamkhyana] differ from each other is not known."[182]

Prasamkhyana was advocated by Mandana Misra,[183] the older contemporary of Shankara who was the most influential Advaitin until the 10th century.[35][184][note 9] "According to Mandana, the mahavakyas are incapable, by themselves, of bringing about brahmajñāna. The Vedānta-vākyas convey an indirect knowledge which is made direct only by deep meditation (prasamkhyana). The latter is a continuous contemplation of the purport of the mahavakyas.[185] Vācaspati Miśra, a student of Mandana Misra, agreed with Mandana Misra, and their stance is defended by the Bhamati-school, founded by Vācaspati Miśra.[186] In contrast, the Vivarana school founded by Prakāśatman (c. 1200–1300)[187] follows Shankara closely, arguing that the mahavakyas are the direct cause of gaining knowledge.[188]

Shankara's insistence on direct knowledge as liberating also differs from the asparsa yoga described in Gaudapada's Mandukyakarika III.39-46.[189] In this practice of 'non-contact' (a-sparśa), the mind is controlled and brought to rest, and does not create

"things" (appearances) after which it grasps; it becomes non-dual, free from the subject-[grasping]-object dualism.[190][52] Knowing that only Atman/Brahman is real, the creations of the mind are seen as false appearances (MK III.31-33). When the mind is brought to rest, it becomes or is Brahman (MK III.46).[189]

Renouncement of ritualism

In the Upadesasahasri Shankara discourages ritual worship such as oblations to Deva (God), because that assumes the Self within is different from Brahman.[note 33][note 34] The "doctrine of difference" is wrong, asserts Shankara, because, "he who knows the Brahman is one and he is another, does not know Brahman".[195][196] The false notion that Atman is different from Brahman[174] is connected with the novice's conviction that (Upadesasaharsi II.1.25)

...I am one [and] He is another; I am ignorant, experience pleasure and pain, am bound and a transmigrator [whereas] he is essentially different from me, the god not subject to transmigration. By worshipping Him with oblation, offerings, homage and the like through the [performance of] the actions prescribed for [my] class and stage of life, I wish to get out of the ocean of transmigratory existence. How am I he?[197]

Recognizing oneself as "the Existent-Brahman," which is mediated by scriptural teachings, is contrasted with the notion of "I act," which is mediated by relying on sense-perception and the like.[198] According to Shankara, the statement "Thou art That" "remove[s] the delusion of a hearer,"[199] "so through sentences as "Thou art That" one knows one's own Atman, the witness of all internal organs,"[200] and not from any actions.[201][note 35] With this realization, the performance of rituals is prohibited, "since [the use of] rituals and their requisites is contradictory to the realization of the identity [of Atman] with the highest Atman." [203]

Philosophy: Reality/truth (Brahman, sat) and the world

The swan is an important motif in Advaita. The white colour of swan symbolises Sattva guṇa & the ability to discern Satya (Real, Eternal) from Mithya (Unreal, Changing), just as the mythical swan Paramahansa discerns milk from water. Classical Advaita Vedānta states that all reality and everything in the experienced world has its root in Brahman, which is unchanging intelligent Consciousness.[4] To Advaitins, there is no duality between a Creator and the created universe.[4][204] All objects, all experiences, all matter, all consciousness, all awareness are somehow also this one fundamental reality Brahman.[4] Yet, the knowing self has various experiences of reality during the waking, dream and dreamless states,[205] and Advaita Vedānta acknowledges and admits that from the empirical perspective there are numerous distinctions.[206] Advaita explains this by postulating different levels of reality,[207][208] [209][205] and by its theory of errors (anirvacaniya khyati).[210][4]

Darśana (view) – central concerns

The ripple, Jivatman, is non-different from the water, Brahman.

Further information: Hindu philosophy

Vedānta is one of the six classical Hindu darśanas, the Indian traditions of religious philosophy and practice which accept the authority of the Vedas. The various schools of Vedanta aim to harmonise the diverging views presented in the Prasthantrayi, the Principal Upanishads,[211][212] along with the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gitā, offering an integrated body of textual interpretations and religious practices which aim at the attainment of moksha, release or liberation from transmigratory existence.[213][214] [note 36]

Rejection of samkhya-dualism

"Samkhya is not one of the systems of Indian philosophy. Samkhya is the philosophy of India!"

Gopinath Kaviraj[216]

The Brahma Sutras, the constituting text of the Vedanta-tradition, rejects the purusha-prakriti dualism of the samkhya-tradition,[20] and "much of the Brahmasutra appears to have been written to refute the perspective of the Samkhya school." [20] Samkhya postulates two independent primal principles, purusha (primal consciousness) and prakriti (nature, which includes both matter and cognition and emotions). In samkhya, prakriti consists of three qualities (Guṇas), which are in balance, until they come in contact with purusha and the equilibrium is disturbed. From this pradhana then evolves the material universe, distinct from purusha, thereby postulating purusha as the efficient cause of all existence, and prakriti as its material cause or origin.[217]

While closely related to Samkhya,[218][20] the Advaita Vedānta tradition rejects this dualism, instead stating that Reality cannot evolve from an inert, consciousness- and intelligence-less principle or essence. Brahman, which is intelligent and consciousness, [20] is the sole Reality,[219][220] "that from which the origination, subsistence, and dissolution of this universe proceed,"[217] as stated in the second verse of the Brahman Sutras. In Samkhya, purusha is the efficient cause, and prakriti is the material cause: purusha causes prakriti to manifest as the natural world. Advaita, like all Vedanta schools, states that Brahman, consciousness, is both the efficient and the material cause, that from which the material universe evolves.[221] Yet, in the Brahmasutras Brahman is a dynamic force, while the Advaita-tradition regards Brahman as an "essentially unchanging and static reality,"[21] since Brahman changing into something else would mean that Brahman would not exist anymore, while a partial change would leave Brahman divided.[21]

Theoretical difficulties

By accepting that Brahman is the sole, unchanging reality, various theoretical difficulties arise which are not answered by the Brahmasutras, which asserts that the Upanishadic views have to be accepted due to their scriptural authority, "regardless of logical problems and philosophical inconsistencies." [21] Advaita and other Vedānta traditions face several problems, for which they offer different solutions.[222][219][220] According

to Deutsch and Dalvi, "The basic problem of Vedanta [is] the relation between the plural, complex, changing phenomenal world and the Brahman in which it substantially subsists." [19] According to Mayeda, following the post-Shankara [20] predicate sat-cit-ananda, three problems emerge. First, how did Brahman, which is sat ('existence'), without any distinction, become manifold material universe? Second, how did Brahman, which is cit ('consciousness'), create the material world? Third, if Brahman is ananda ('bliss'), why did the empirical world of sufferings arise? The Brahma Sutras do not answer these philosophical queries, and later Vedantins including Shankara had to resolve them. [222]

To solve these questions, Shankara introduced the concept of "Unevolved Name-and-Form," or primal matter corresponding to Prakriti, from which the world evolves, [223] coming close to Samkhya dualism. [224] Shankara's notion of "Unevolved Name-and-Form" was not adopted by the later Advaita tradition; instead, the later tradition turned avidya into a metaphysical principle, namely mulavidya or "root ignorance," a metaphysical substance which is the "primal material cause of the universe (upadana)." [225] In this view, Brahman alone is real, and the phenomenal world is an appearance (maya) or "an unreal manifestation (vivarta) of Brahman." [23] Prakasatmans (13th c.) defense of vivarta to explain the origin of the world, which declared phenomenal reality to be an illusion, [24] became the dominant explanation, with which the primacy of Atman/Brahman can be maintained. [219][220]

Relation between jivatman and Atman/Brahman

A main question in all schools of Vedanta is the relation between the individual self (jiva) and Atman/Brahman. [226] As Shankara and his followers regard Atman/Brahman to be the ultimate Real, jivanatman is "ultimately [to be] of the nature of Atman/Brahman." [219] [6] This truth is established from a literal reading of selected parts [86] of the oldest Principal Upanishads and Brahma Sutras, and is also found in parts of the Bhagavad Gitā and numerous other Hindu texts, [4] and is regarded to be self-evident. [134] [note 37] Great effort is made to show the correctness of this reading, and its compatibility with reason and experience, by criticizing other systems of thought. [134] Vidya, correct knowledge or understanding of the identity of jivan-ātman and Brahman, destroys or makes null avidya ('false knowledge'), and results in liberation. [228] [note 38]

Three levels of Reality/truth

See also: Three Bodies Doctrine (Vedanta) and Two truths doctrine

Shankara proposes three levels of reality, using sublation as the ontological criterion: [207][208][209]

Pāramārthika (paramartha, absolute), the Reality that is metaphysically true and ontologically accurate. It is the state of experiencing that "which is absolutely real and into which both other reality levels can be resolved". This reality is the highest; it can't be sublated (assimilated) by any other. [207][229] Ultimate reality only consists of Brahman. Everything else is like a dream. [230]

Vyāvahārika (vyavahara), or samvriti-saya, [231] consisting of the empirical or

pragmatical reality. It is ever changing over time, thus empirically true at a given time and context but not metaphysically true. It is "our world of experience, the phenomenal world that we handle every day when we are awake". It is the level in which both jiva (living creatures or individual Selves) and Iswara are true; here, the material world is also true but this is incomplete reality and is sublatale.[229][232] Vyāvahārika reality results from superimposing ignorance on Brahman, like seeing a snake instead of a rope.[230] Prātibhāsika (pratibhasika, apparent reality, unreality), "reality based on imagination alone". It is the level of experience in which the mind constructs its own reality. Well-known examples of pratibhasika is the imaginary reality such as the "roaring of a lion" fabricated in dreams during one's sleep, and the perception of a rope in the dark as being a snake.[229][233][234]

Absolute and relative reality are valid and true in their respective contexts, but only from their respective particular perspectives.[205][206][235] John Grimes explains this Advaita doctrine of absolute and relative truth with the example of light and darkness. [206] From the sun's perspective, it neither rises nor sets, there is no darkness, and "all is light". From the perspective of a person on earth, sun does rise and set, there is both light and darkness, not "all is light", there are relative shades of light and darkness. Both are valid realities and truths, given their perspectives. Yet, they are contradictory. What is true from one point of view, states Grimes, is not from another. To Advaita Vedānta, this does not mean there are two truths and two realities, but it only means that the same one Reality and one Truth is explained or experienced from two different perspectives.[206][236]

As they developed these theories, Advaita Vedānta scholars were influenced by some ideas from the Nyaya, Samkhya and Yoga schools of Hindu philosophy.[237][209] These theories have not enjoyed universal consensus among Advaitins, and various competing ontological interpretations have flowered within the Advaita tradition.[4][238][note 39]

Pāramārthika - Sat (True Reality)

Ātman

Main article: Ātman (Hinduism)

See also: Samadhi, Buddha-nature, Sunyata, and Choiceless awareness

Ātman (IAST: ātman, Sanskrit: आत्मन्) is the "real self"[239][240][241][242][note 40] or "essence"[web 11][note 41] of the individual. It is caitanya, Pure Consciousness,[243] a consciousness, states Sthaneshwar Timalsina, that is "self-revealed, self-evident and self-aware (svaprakashata),"[242] and, states Payne, "in some way permanent, eternal, absolute or unchanging." [note 41] It is self-existent awareness, limitless and non-dual. [78] It is "a stable subjectivity, or a unity of consciousness through all the specific states of individuated phenomenality." [244] Ātman, states Eliot Deutsch, is the "pure, undifferentiated, supreme power of awareness", it is more than thought, it is a state of being, that which is conscious and transcends subject-object divisions and momentariness.[245] According to Ram-Prasad, "it" is not an object, but "the irreducible essence of being [as] subjectivity, rather than an objective self with the quality of consciousness." [246]

According to Shankara, it is self-evident and "a matter not requiring any proof" that Atman, the 'I', is 'as different as light is from darkness' from non-Atman, the 'you' or 'that', the material world whose characteristics are mistakenly superimposed on Atman, resulting in notions as "I am this" and "This is mine." [247] One's real self is not the constantly changing body, not the desires, not the emotions, not the ego, nor the dualistic mind, [248][249][250] but the introspective, inwardly self-conscious "on-looker" (saksi), [251] which is in reality completely disconnected from the non-Atman. [247]

The jivatman or individual self is a mere reflection of singular Atman in a multitude of apparent individual bodies. [22] It is "not an individual subject of consciousness," [244] but the same in each person and identical to the universal eternal Brahman, [79] a term used interchangeably with Atman. [252]

Atman is often translated as soul, [note 42] though the two concepts differ significantly, since "soul" includes mental activities, whereas "Atman" solely refers to detached witness-consciousness.

Three states of consciousness and Turiya

Advaita posits three states of consciousness, namely waking (jagrat), dreaming (svapna), deep sleep (susupti), which are empirically experienced by human beings, [253][254] and correspond to the Three Bodies Doctrine: [255]

The first state is the waking state, in which we are aware of our daily world. [256] This is the gross body.

The second state is the dreaming mind. This is the subtle body. [256]

The third state is the state of deep sleep. This is the causal body. [256]

Advaita also posits "the fourth," Turiya, which some describe as pure consciousness, the background that underlies and transcends these three common states of consciousness. [web 12][web 13] Turiya is the state of liberation, where states Advaita school, one experiences the infinite (ananta) and non-different (advaita/abheda), that is free from the dualistic experience, the state in which ajativada, non-origination, is apprehended. [257] According to Candradhara Sarma, Turiya state is where the foundational Self is realized, it is measureless, neither cause nor effect, all pervading, without suffering, blissful, changeless, self-luminous, [note 5] real, immanent in all things and transcendent. [258] Those who have experienced the Turiya stage of self-consciousness have reached the pure awareness of their own non-dual Self as one with everyone and everything, for them the knowledge, the knower, the known becomes one, they are the Jivanmukta. [259][260][261][262][263]

Advaita traces the foundation of this ontological theory in more ancient Sanskrit texts. [264] For example, chapters 8.7 through 8.12 of Chandogya Upanishad discuss the "four states of consciousness" as awake, dream-filled sleep, deep sleep, and beyond deep sleep. [264][265] One of the earliest mentions of Turiya, in the Hindu scriptures, occurs in verse 5.14.3 of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. [note 43] The idea is also

discussed in other early Upanishads.[266]

Svayam prakāśa (self-luminosity)

Brahma Jnanavali Mala, attributed to Adi Shankara:[web 14]

6. I am the indwelling consciousness, I am calm (free from all agitation), I am beyond prakṛiti (maya), I am of the nature of eternal bliss, I am the very Self, indestructible and changeless.

14. I am a mass of awareness and of consciousness. I am not a doer nor an experiencer. I am the very Self, indestructible and changeless.

Manisha Panchakam, attributed to Adi Shankara:[web 15]

Main article: Prakāśa

See also: Svasaṃvedana

In the Advaita tradition, consciousness is svayam prakāśa, "self-luminous,"[4][267][note 5] which means that "self is pure awareness by nature." [268] According to Dasgupta, it is "the most fundamental concept of the Vedānta." [269] According to T. R. V. Murti, the Vedānta concept is explained as follows:

The point to be reached is a foundational consciousness that is unconditional, self-evident, and immediate (svayam-prakāśa). It is that to which everything is presented, but is itself no presentation, that which knows all, but is itself no object. The self should not be confused with the contents and states which it enjoys and manipulates. If we have to give an account of it, we can describe it only as what it is not, for any positive description of it would be possible only if it could be made an object of observation, which from the nature of the case it is not. We "know" it only as we withdraw ourselves from the body with which we happen to be identified, in this transition.[270][note 44]

According to Jonardon Ganeri, the concept was introduced by the Buddhist philosopher Dignāga (c.480–c.540 CE), and accepted by the Vedānta tradition;[268] according to Zhihua Yao, the concept has older roots in the Mahasanghika school.[271]

Brahman

Main articles: Brahman and Satcitananda

According to Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is the true Self, consciousness, awareness, intelligent, possessed with will, and the only Reality (Sat).[77][272][273][note 45] Brahman is Paramarthika Satyam, "Absolute Truth"[274] or absolute Real.[275] It is That which is unborn and unchanging,[272][276] and immortal.[note 7] Other than Brahman, everything else, including the universe, material objects and individuals, are ever-changing and therefore maya. Brahman is "not sublatale",[77] which means it cannot be superseded by a still higher reality:[277]

the true Self, pure consciousness [...] the only Reality (sat), since It is untinged by

difference, the mark of ignorance, and since It is the one thing that is not sublatale".
[77]

In Advaita, Brahman is the substrate and cause of all changes.[272][276] Refuting samkhya, which considers pradhana or prakriti the material cause (primal matter) and purusha the efficient cause,[278] in Advaita Vedanta Brahman is considered to be the material cause[[note 46](#)] and the efficient cause[[note 47](#)] of all that exists.[279][280][281] The Brahma Sutras I.1.2 state that Brahman is:

...that from which the origination, subsistence, and dissolution of this universe proceed.
[282][[note 48](#)]

Advaita's Upanishadic roots state Brahman's qualities[[note 49](#)] to be Sat-cit-ānanda, [284][285][286] "true being-consciousness-bliss,"[286][287] or "Eternal Bliss Consciousness".[288][[note 50](#)] A distinction is made between nirguna Brahman, formless Brahman, and saguna Brahman, Brahman with form, that is, Ishvara, God. Nirguna Brahman is undescrivable, and the Upanishadic neti neti ('not this, not that' or 'neither this, nor that') negates all conceptualizations of Brahman.[85][289]

Vyāvahārika (conventional reality) – Avidya and Māyā
Avidyā (ignorance)

Avidyā is a central tenet of Shankara's Advaita, and became the main target of Ramanuja's criticism of Shankara.[290][291] In Shankara's view, avidyā is adhyasa, "the superimposition of the qualities of one thing upon another." [292] As Shankara explains in the Adhyasa-bhasya, the introduction to the Brahmasutrabhasya:

Owing to an absence of discrimination, there continues a natural human behaviour in the form of 'I am this' or 'This is mine'; this is avidya. It is a superimposition of the attributes of one thing on another. The ascertainment of the nature of the real entity by separating the superimposed thing from it is vidya (knowledge, illumination).

Due to avidya, we're steeped in loka drsti, the empirical view.[293] From the beginning we only perceive the empirical world of multiplicity, taking it to be the only and true reality.[293][294] Due to avidyā there is ignorance, or nescience, of the real Self, Atman/Brahman, mistakenly identifying the Self with the body-mind complex.[web 16] With parmartha drsti ignorance is removed and vidya is acquired, and the Real, distinctionless Brahman is perceived as the True reality.[293]

The notion of avidyā and its relationship to Brahman creates a crucial philosophical issue within Advaita Vedānta thought: how can avidyā appear in Brahman, since Brahman is pure consciousness?[295] For Shankara, avidya is a perceptual or psychological error.[225] According to Satchidanandendra Saraswati, for Shankara "avidya is only a technical name to denote the natural tendency of the human mind that is engaged in the act of superimposition." [296] The later tradition diverged from Shankara by turning avidya into a metaphysical principle, namely mulavidya or "root

ignorance," a metaphysical substance which is the "primal material cause of the universe (upadana)," thereby setting aside Shankara's 'Unevolved Name-and-Form' as the explanation for the existence of materiality.[225][297] According to Mayeda, "[i]n order to save monism, they characterized avidya as indefinable as real or unreal (sadasadbhyam anirvacanya), belonging neither to the category of being nor to that of non-being." [225] In the 20th century, this theory of mulavidya became a point of strong contention among Advaita Vedantins, with Satchidanandendra Saraswati arguing that Padmapada and Prakasatman had misconstrued Shankara's stance.[298]

Shankara did not give a 'location' of avidya, giving precedence to the removal of ignorance.[299][note 51] Sengaku Mayeda writes, in his commentary and translation of Adi Shankara's Upadesasahasri:

Certainly the most crucial problem which Sankara left for his followers is that of avidyā. If the concept is logically analysed, it would lead the Vedanta philosophy toward dualism or nihilism and uproot its fundamental position.[300]

The later Advaita-tradition diverged from Shankara, trying to determinate a locus of avidya,[301] with the Bhamati-school locating avidya in the jiva c.q. prakriti, while the Vivarana-school locates it in Brahman.[302][301]

Māyā (appearance)

In Advaita Vedanta, the perceived empirical world, "including people and other existence," is Māyā, "appearance." [303][304] Jiva, conditioned by the human mind, is subjected to experiences of a subjective nature, and misunderstands and interprets the physical, changing world as the sole and final reality.[303] Due to avidya, we take the phenomenal world to be the final reality,[web 16] while in Reality only Sat (True Reality, Brahman) is Real and unchanging.[305]

While Shankara took a realistic stance, and his explanations are "remote from any connotation of illusion," the 13th century scholar Prakasatman, founder of the influential Vivarana school, introduced the notion that the world is illusory.[24][219][220] According to Hacker, maya is not a prominent theme for Shankara, in contrast to the later Advaita tradition, and "the word maya has for [Shankara] hardly any terminological weight." [306]

Five koshas (sheaths)

Due to avidya, atman is covered by koshas (sheaths or bodies), which hide man's true nature. According to the Taittiriya Upanishad, the Atman is covered by five koshas, usually rendered "sheath".[307] They are often visualized like the layers of an onion. [308] From gross to fine the five sheaths are:

Annamaya kosha, physical/food sheath

Pranamaya kosha, life-force sheath

Manomaya kosha, mental sheath

Vijnanamaya kosha, discernment/wisdom sheath

Anandamaya kosha, bliss sheath (Ananda)

Parinamavada and vivartavada - causality and change

See also: Satkāryavāda, Ajativada, and Vivartavada

Cause and effect are an important topic in all schools of Vedānta.[note 52] Two sorts of causes are recognised, namely Nimitta kāraṇa, the efficient cause, that which causes the existence of the universe, and Upādāna kāraṇa, the material cause, that from which the matter of this universe comes.[310] All schools of Vedānta agree that Brahman is both the material and the efficient cause, and all subscribe to the theory of Satkāryavāda,[web 18] which means that the effect is pre-existent in the cause.[23][note 53]

There are different views on the origination of the empirical world from Brahman. All commentators "agree that Brahman is the cause of the world," but disagree on how exactly Brahman is the cause of the world.[23] According to Nicholson, "Mediaeval Vedantins distinguished two basic positions." Parinamavada is the idea that the world is a real transformation (parinama) of Brahman.[23] Vivartavada is the idea that

the world is merely an unreal manifestation (vivarta) of Brahman. Vivartavada states that although Brahman appears to undergo a transformation, in fact no real change takes place. The myriad of beings are unreal manifestation, as the only real being is Brahman, that ultimate reality which is unborn, unchanging, and entirely without parts.[23]

20th verse of Brahmajñanavalimala, attributed to Shankara:

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या
जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः

Brahman is real, the world is an illusion
Brahman and Jiva are not different.

Brahmajñanavalimala 1.20[web 20]

The Brahma Sutras, the ancient Vedantins, most sub-schools of Vedānta,[23][web 18] as well as Samkhya argue for parinamavada.[web 18] The "most visible advocates of Vivartavada," states Nicholson, are the Advaitins, the followers of Shankara.[23] "Although the world can be described as conventionally real", adds Nicholson, "the Advaitins claim that all of Brahman's effects must ultimately be acknowledged as unreal before the individual self can be liberated".[web 18][note 54]

Yet, Adi Shankara himself most likely explained causality through parinamavada.[web 18][23][24][312] In Shankara's works "Brahman constitutes the basic essence (svabhava) of the universe (BS Bh 3.2.21) and as such the universe cannot be thought of as distinct from it (BS Bh 2.1.14)." In Shankara's view, then, "The world is real, but only in so far as its existence is seen as totally dependent upon Brahman." [312]

Shankara introduced the concept of "Unevolved Name-and-Form," or primal matter corresponding to Prakriti, from which the world evolves,[223] but this concept was not adopted by the later Advaita tradition.[24] Vivartavada became the dominant explanation, with which the primacy of Atman/Brahman can be maintained.[219][220] Scholars such as Hajime Nakamura and Paul Hacker already noted that Adi Shankara did not advocate Vivartavada, and his explanations are "remote from any connotation of illusion".[24][note 55]

Manisha Panchakam, attributed to Adi Shankara:[web 21]

2. I am Brahman (pure consciousness). It is pure consciousness that appears as this universe.

It was the 13th century scholar Prakasatman, who founded the influential Vivarana school, who gave a definition to vivarta, introducing the notion that the world is illusory. It is Prakasatman's theory that is sometimes misunderstood as Adi Shankara's position. [24] Andrew Nicholson concurs with Hacker and other scholars, adding that the vivartavada isn't Shankara's theory, that Shankara's ideas appear closer to parinama-vada, and the vivarta explanation likely emerged gradually in Advaita subschool later.[web 18] [note 56]

Ethics

Some claim, states Deutsch, "that Advaita turns its back on all theoretical and practical considerations of morality and, if not unethical, is at least 'a-ethical' in character".[315] However, Deutsch adds, ethics does have a firm place in this philosophy. Its ideology is permeated with ethics and value questions enter into every metaphysical and epistemological analysis, and it considers "an independent, separate treatment of ethics are unnecessary".[315][316] According to Advaita Vedānta, states Deutsch, there cannot be "any absolute moral laws, principles or duties", instead in its axiological view Atman is "beyond good and evil", and all values result from self-knowledge of the reality of "distinctionless Oneness" of one's real self, every other being and all manifestations of Brahman.[317] Advaitin ethics includes lack of craving, lack of dual distinctions between one's own Self and another being's, good and just Karma.[318]

The values and ethics in Advaita Vedānta emanate from what it views as inherent in the state of liberating self-knowledge. This state, according to Rambachan, includes and leads to the understanding that "the self is the self of all, the knower of self sees the self in all beings and all beings in the self." [80] Such knowledge and understanding of the indivisibility of one's and other's Atman, Advaitins believe leads to "a deeper identity and affinity with all". It does not alienate or separate an Advaitin from his or her community, rather awakens "the truth of life's unity and interrelatedness".[80] These ideas are exemplified in the Isha Upanishad – a sruti for Advaita, as follows:

One who sees all beings in the self alone, and the self of all beings,

feels no hatred by virtue of that understanding.
For the seer of oneness, who knows all beings to be the self,
where is delusion and sorrow?

—Isha Upanishad 6–7, Translated by A Rambachan[319]

Adi Shankara, in verse 1.25 to 1.26 of his Upadeśasāhasrī, asserts that the Self-knowledge is understood and realized when one's mind is purified by the observation of Yamas (ethical precepts) such as Ahimsa (non-violence, abstinence from injuring others in body, mind and thoughts), Satya (truth, abstinence from falsehood), Asteya (abstinence from theft), Aparigraha (abstinence from possessiveness and craving) and a simple life of meditation and reflection.[320] Rituals and rites can help focus and prepare the mind for the journey to Self-knowledge,[321] but can be abandoned when moving on to "hearing, reflection, and meditation on the Upanishads." [322]

Elsewhere, in verses 1.26–1.28, the Advaita text Upadesasahasri states the ethical premise of equality of all beings. Any Bheda (discrimination), states Shankara, based on class or caste or parentage is a mark of inner error and lack of liberating knowledge. [323] This text states that the fully liberated person understands and practices the ethics of non-difference.[323]

One, who is eager to realize this highest truth spoken of in the Sruti, should rise above the fivefold form of desire: for a son, for wealth, for this world and the next, and are the outcome of a false reference to the Self of Varna (castes, colors, classes) and orders of life. These references are contradictory to right knowledge, and reasons are given by the Srutis regarding the prohibition of the acceptance of difference. For when the knowledge that the one non-dual Atman (Self) is beyond phenomenal existence is generated by the scriptures and reasoning, there cannot exist a knowledge side by side that is contradictory or contrary to it.

—Adi Shankara, Upadesha Sahasri 1.44, [324][note 57]

Texts

The Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gitā and Brahma Sutras are the central texts of the Advaita Vedānta tradition, lending authority to the doctrines about the identity of Atman and Brahman and their changeless nature.[6][325]

Adi Shankara gave a nondualist interpretation of these texts in his commentaries. Adi Shankara's Bhashya (commentaries) have become central texts in the Advaita Vedānta philosophy, but are one among many ancient and medieval manuscripts available or accepted in this tradition.[32] The subsequent Advaita tradition has further elaborated on these sruti and commentaries. Adi Shankara is also credited for the famous text Nirvana Shatakam.

Prasthanatrayi

The Vedānta tradition provides exegeses of the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavadgita, collectively called the Prasthanatrayi, literally, three sources.[326][6]

[325]

The Upanishads,[note 58] or Śruti prasthāna; considered the Śruti (Vedic scriptures) foundation of Vedānta.[note 59][214][329][330] Most scholars, states Eliot Deutsch, are convinced that the Śruti in general, and the Upanishads in particular, express "a very rich diversity" of ideas, with the early Upanishads such as Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and Chandogya Upanishad being more readily amenable to Advaita Vedānta school's interpretation than the middle or later Upanishads.[331][332] In addition to the oldest Upanishads, states Williams, the Sannyasa Upanishads group composed in pre-Shankara times "express a decidedly Advaita outlook".[333]

The Brahma Sutras, or Nyaya prasthana / Yukti prasthana; considered the reason-based foundation of Vedānta. The Brahma Sutras attempted to synthesize the teachings of the Upanishads. The diversity in the teachings of the Upanishads necessitated the systematization of these teachings. The only extant version of this synthesis is the Brahma Sutras of Badarayana. Like the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras is also an aphoristic text, and can be interpreted as a non-theistic Advaita Vedānta text or as a theistic Dvaita Vedānta text. This has led, states Stephen Phillips, to its varying interpretations by scholars of various sub-schools of Vedānta.[334] The Brahmasutra is considered by the Advaita school as the Nyaya Prasthana (canonical base for reasoning).[335]

The Bhagavad Gitā, or Smṛiti prasthāna; considered the Smṛiti (remembered tradition) foundation of Vedānta.[335] It has been widely studied by Advaita scholars, including a commentary by Adi Shankara.[139][336]

Textual authority

The Advaita Vedānta tradition considers the knowledge claims in the Vedas to be the crucial part of the Vedas, not its karma-kanda (ritual injunctions).[6] The knowledge claims about self being identical to the nature of Atman/Brahman are found in the Upanishads, which Advaita Vedānta has regarded as "errorless revealed truth." [6] Nevertheless, states Koller, Advaita Vedantins did not entirely rely on revelation, but critically examined their teachings using reason and experience, and this led them to investigate and critique competing theories.[6]

Advaita Vedānta, like all orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, accepts as an epistemic premise that Śruti (Vedic literature) is a reliable source of knowledge.[214][329][330]

The Śruti includes the four Vedas including its four layers of embedded texts – the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the early Upanishads.[337] Of these, the Upanishads are the most referred to texts in the Advaita school.

The possibility of different interpretations of the Vedic literature, states Arvind Sharma, was recognized by ancient Indian scholars.[338][336] The Brahmasutra (also called Vedānta Sutra, composed in 1st millennium BCE) accepted this in verse 1.1.4 and asserts the need for the Upanishadic teachings to be understood not in piecemeal cherry-picked basis, rather in a unified way wherein the ideas in the Vedic texts are harmonized with other means of knowledge such as perception, inference and remaining pramanas.[338][335] This theme has been central to the Advaita school,

making the Brahmasutra as a common reference and a consolidated textual authority for Advaita.[338][339]

The Bhagavad Gitā, similarly in parts can be interpreted to be a monist Advaita text, and in other parts as theistic Dvaita text. It too has been widely studied by Advaita scholars, including a commentary by Adi Shankara.[139][336]

Other texts

A large number of texts are attributed to Shankara; of these texts, the Brahma Sutra Bhasya (commentary on the Brahma Sutras), the commentaries on the principal Upanishads, and the Upadesasahasri are considered genuine and stand out.[citation needed]

Post-Shankara Advaita saw the composition of both scholarly commentaries and treatises, as well as, from late mediaeval times (14th century) on, popular works and compositions which incorporate Yoga ideas. These include notable texts mistakenly attributed to Shankara, such as the Vivekachudamani, Atma bodha, and Aparokshanubhuti; and other texts like Advaita Bodha Deepika and Dṛg-Dṛśya-Viveka. Texts which influenced the Advaita tradition include the Avadhuta Gita, the Yoga Vasistha, and the Yoga Yajnavalkya.[citation needed]

Sampradaya and Smarta tradition

Monastic order - Mathas

See also: Dashanami Sampradaya

(Vidyashankara temple) at Sringeri Sharada Peetham, Sringeri

Advaita Vedānta is not just a philosophical system, but also a tradition of monastic renunciation. Philosophy and renunciation are closely related:[web 22]

Most of the notable authors in the advaita tradition were members of the sannyasa tradition, and both sides of the tradition share the same values, attitudes and metaphysics.[web 22]

According to tradition, around 740 AD Gaudapada founded Shri Gaudapadacharya Math[^{note 60}], also known as Kavalē matha. It is located in Kavale, Ponda, Goa,[web 23] and is the oldest matha of the South Indian Saraswat Brahmins.[340][web 24]

Shankara, himself considered to be an incarnation of Shiva,[web 22] is credited with establishing the Dashanami Sampradaya, organizing a section of the Ekadandi monks under an umbrella grouping of ten names.[web 22] Several Hindu monastic and Ekadandi traditions, however, remained outside the organisation of the Dasanāmis.[341][342][343]

Sankara is said to have organised the Hindu monks of these ten sects or names under

four Maṭhas (Sanskrit: मठ) (monasteries), called the Amnaya Mathas, with the headquarters at Dvārakā in the West, Jagannatha Puri in the East, Sringeri in the South and Badrikashrama in the North.[web 22] According to tradition, each math was first headed by one of his four main disciples, and the tradition continues since then. Yet, according to Paul Hacker, no mention of the mathas can be found before the 14th century CE.[344] Until the 15th century, the timespan of the directors of Sringeri Math are unrealistically long, spanning 60+ and even 105 years. After 1386, the timespans become much shorter.[345] According to Hacker, these mathas may have originated as late as the 14th century, to propagate Shankara's view of Advaita.[346][note 61][note 62] According to another tradition in Kerala, after Sankara's samadhi at Vadakkunnathan Temple, his disciples founded four mathas in Thrissur, namely Naduvil Madhom, Thekke Madhom, Idayil Madhom and Vadakke Madhom.

Monks of these ten orders differ in part in their beliefs and practices, and a section of them is not considered to be restricted to specific changes attributed to Shankara. While the dasanāmis associated with the Sankara maths follow the procedures attributed to Adi Śankara, some of these orders remained partly or fully independent in their belief and practices; and outside the official control of the Sankara maths. The advaita sampradaya is not a Saiva sect,[web 22][350] despite the historical links with Shaivism. [note 63] Nevertheless, contemporary Sankaracaryas have more influence among Saiva communities than among Vaisnava communities.[web 22]

Smarta Tradition

Main article: Smarta Tradition

The Smarta tradition of Hinduism is a synthesis of various strands of Indian religious thought and practice, which developed with the Hindu synthesis, dating back to the early first century CE.[note 64] It is particularly found in south and west India, and reveres all Hindu divinities as a step in their spiritual pursuit.[352][353][354] Their worship practice is called Panchayatana puja.[355][352] The worship symbolically consists of five deities: Shiva, Vishnu, Devi or Durga, Surya and an Ishta Devata or any personal god of devotee's preference.[353][356]

In the Smarta tradition, Advaita Vedānta ideas combined with bhakti are its foundation. Adi Shankara is regarded as the greatest teacher[354] and reformer of the Smarta.[357] According to Alf Hiltebeitel, Shankara's Advaita Vedānta and practices became the doctrinal unifier of previously conflicting practices with the smarta tradition.[note 65]

Philosophically, the Smarta tradition emphasizes that all images and statues (murti), or just five marks or any anicons on the ground, are visibly convenient icons of spirituality saguna Brahman.[359][355] The multiple icons are seen as multiple representations of the same idea, rather than as distinct beings. These serve as a step and means to realizing the abstract Ultimate Reality called nirguna Brahman. The ultimate goal in this practice is to transition past the use of icons, then follow a philosophical and meditative path to understanding the oneness of Atman (Self) and Brahman – as "That art Thou".

[359][360]

Buddhist influences on Advaita Vedānta

Main article: Buddhist philosophy

Further information: Buddhist influences on Advaita Vedanta

Similarities with Buddhism

Advaita Vedānta and other schools of Hindu philosophy share numerous terminology, doctrines, and dialectical techniques with Buddhism.[361][362] According to a 1918 paper by the Buddhist scholar O. Rozenberg, "a precise differentiation between Brahmanism and Buddhism is impossible to draw." [361] T. R. V. Murti notices that "the ultimate goal" of Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, and Mahāyāna Buddhism is "remarkably similar"; while Advaita Vedānta postulates a "foundational self", according to Murti "Mahāyāna Buddhism implicitly affirms the existence of a deep underlying reality behind all empirical manifestations in its conception of śūnyatā (the indeterminate, the void), or vijñapti-mātra (consciousness only), or tathātā (thatness), or dhārmata (noumenal reality)." [270] According to Frank Whaling, the similarities between Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism are not limited to the terminology and some doctrines, but also includes practice. The monastic practices and monk tradition in Advaita Vedānta are similar to those found in Buddhism.[363]

Mahāyāna philosophy

The influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism on Advaita Vedānta has been significant.[363] [364] Sharma points out that the early commentators on the Brahma Sūtras were all realists, or pantheist realists. He states that they were influenced by Buddhism, particularly during the 5th–6th centuries CE with the development of the Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy.[365] Von Glasenapp states that there was a mutual influence between Vedānta and Buddhism.[note 66] S. N. Dasgupta and Mohanta suggest that Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta represent "different phases of development of the same non-dualistic metaphysics from the Upanishadic period to the time of Śaṅkara." [366][note 67]

The influence of Buddhist doctrines on Gauḍapāda has been a vexed question.[369] [370] Modern scholarship generally accepts that Gauḍapāda was influenced by Buddhism, at least in terms of using Buddhist terminology to explain his ideas, but adds that Gauḍapāda was a Vedantin and not a Buddhist.[369] Ādi Śaṅkara, states Natalia Isaeva, incorporated "into his own system a Buddhist notion of māyā which had not been minutely elaborated in the Upanishads".[361] According to Mudgal, Śaṅkara's Advaita view and Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka view of ultimate reality are compatible because they are both transcendental, indescribable, non-dual and only arrived at through a via negativa or neti neti. Mudgal concludes therefore that "the difference between Śūnyavāda philosophy of Buddhism and Advaita philosophy of Hinduism may be a matter of emphasis, not of kind".[371] Similarly, there are many points of contact between the Buddhist Yogācāra school and Śaṅkara's Advaita tradition.[372] According to S. N. Dasgupta,

Śaṅkara and his followers borrowed much of their dialectic form of criticism from the Buddhists. His Brahman was very much like the śūnya of Nāgārjuna [...] The debts of Śaṅkara to the self-luminosity[^{note 5}] of the Vijñānavāda Buddhism can hardly be overestimated. There seems to be much truth in the accusations against Śaṅkara by Vijñāna Bhikṣu and others that he was a hidden Buddhist himself. I am led to think that Śaṅkara's philosophy is largely a compound of Vijñānavāda and Śūnyavāda Buddhism with the Upanishadic notion of the permanence of self superadded.[373]

Differences from Buddhism

The Advaita Vedānta tradition has historically rejected accusations of crypto-Buddhism highlighting their respective views on Ātman, Anattā, and Brahman.[374] Yet, some early Buddhist texts (1st millennium CE), such as the Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras suggest "self-like" concepts, variously called Tathāgatagarbha or "Buddha nature".[375][376] In modern era studies, scholars such as Wayman state that these "self-like" concepts are neither self nor sentient being, nor individual soul, nor personality.[377][378] Some scholars posit that the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras were written to promote Buddhism to non-Buddhists.[379][380][381]

The epistemological foundations of Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta are different. Buddhism accepts two valid means to reliable and correct knowledge—perception and inference, while Advaita Vedānta accepts six (described elsewhere in this article).[124][382][383] However, some Buddhists in history, have argued that Buddhist scriptures are a reliable source of spiritual knowledge, corresponding to Advaita's Śabda pramāṇa, however Buddhists have treated their scriptures as a form of inference method.[384]

Advaita Vedānta posits a substance ontology, an ontology which holds that underlying the change and impermanence of empirical reality is an unchanging and permanent absolute reality, like an eternal substance it calls Ātman/Brahman.[385] In its substance ontology, as like other philosophies, there exist a universal, particulars, and specific properties, and it is the interaction of particulars that create events and processes.[386] In contrast, Buddhism posits a process ontology, also called as "event ontology".[387][386] According to Buddhist philosophy, particularly after the rise of ancient Mahāyāna Buddhist scholarship, the concept of impermanence (anicca) is understood as one of the three marks of existence (trilakṣaṇa):[388] there is neither empirical nor absolute permanent reality, because all phenomena are characterized by their lack of a solid and independent existence (svabhāva), and ontology can be explained as a process.[387][389][^{note 68}]

In Buddhist ontology, there is a system of dependent origination and interdependent phenomena (pratītya-samutpāda) but no stable persistent identities, neither eternal universals nor particulars.[388] In Buddhism, thoughts and memories are mental constructions and fluid processes (skandhā) without a real observer, personal agent, or cognizer (anattā).[388] By contrast, in Advaita Vedānta and the other orthodox schools of Hinduism, the eternal, unchanging ultimate self (ātman) identical with Brahman is understood as the real observer, personal agent, and cognizer.[391] However, the

historical Buddha considered this Brahmanical belief to be one of the six wrong views about the self; in fact, Buddha held that attachment to the appearance of a permanent self in this world of change is the cause of suffering (duḥkha), and the main obstacle to the attainment of spiritual liberation (mokṣa).[388]

Criticisms of concurring Hindu schools

Some Hindu scholars have criticized Advaita Vedānta for its notion of māyā and non-theistic doctrinal similarities with Buddhism,[392][363] sometimes referring to the Advaita tradition as Māyāvāda.[393]

Bhāskara, a Hindu philosopher of the Bhedabheda Vedānta school (9th century CE), accused Śaṅkara's Advaita tradition as "this despicable broken down Māyāvāda that has been chanted by the Mahāyāna Buddhists", characterizing it as a school that is undermining the ritual duties set in Vedic orthodoxy.[363]

Rāmāṇuja, a Hindu saint and founder of the Vishishtadvaita Vedānta school (12th century CE), similarly accused Ādi Śaṅkara of being a Prachanna Bauddha, that is, a "crypto-Buddhist",[394] and someone who was undermining the theistic Bhakti-oriented devotionalism.[363]

Relationship with other traditions

The Advaita Vedānta ideas, particularly of 8th century Adi Shankara, were challenged by theistic Vedānta philosophies that emerged centuries later, such as the 11th-century Vishishtadvaita (qualified nondualism) of Ramanuja, and the 14th-century Dvaita (theistic dualism) of Madhvacharya.[395] Their application of Vedanta philosophy to ground their faith turned Vedanta into a major factor in India's religious landscape.[396]

Vishishtadvaita

Main article: Vishishtadvaita

Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita school and Shankara's Advaita school are both nondualism Vedānta schools,[397][398] both are premised on the assumption that all Selfs can hope for and achieve the state of blissful liberation; in contrast, Madhvacharya and his Dvaita subschool of Vedānta believed that some Selfs are eternally doomed and damned.[399] [400] Shankara's theory posits that only Brahman and causes are metaphysical unchanging reality, while the empirical world (Maya) and observed effects are changing, illusive and of relative existence.[401][402] Spiritual liberation to Shankara is the full comprehension and realization of oneness of one's unchanging Atman (Self) as the same as Atman in everyone else as well as being identical to the nirguna Brahman.[398] [403][404] In contrast, Ramanuja's theory posits both Brahman and the world of matter are two different absolutes, both metaphysically real, neither should be called false or illusive, and saguna Brahman with attributes is also real.[402] God, like man, states Ramanuja, has both soul and body, and all of the world of matter is the glory of God's body.[397] The path to Brahman (Vishnu), asserted Ramanuja, is devotion to godliness and constant remembrance of the beauty and love of personal god (saguna Brahman, Vishnu), one which ultimately leads one to the oneness with nirguna Brahman.[397]

[401][402]

Shuddhadvaita

Main article: Shuddhadvaita

Vallabhacharya (1479–1531 CE), the proponent of the philosophy of Shuddhadvaita Brahmvad enunciates that Ishvara has created the world without connection with any external agency such as Maya (which itself is his power) and manifests Himself through the world.[405] That is why shuddhadvaita is known as 'Unmodified transformation' or 'Avikṛta Pariṇāmavāda'. Brahman or Ishvara desired to become many, and he became the multitude of individual Selves and the world. Vallabha recognises Brahman as the whole and the individual as a 'part' (but devoid of bliss).[406]

Dvaita

Main article: Dvaita

Madhvacharya was also a critic of Advaita Vedānta. Advaita's nondualism asserted that Atman (Self) and Brahman are identical (both in bondage and liberation[407]), there is interconnected oneness of all Selves and Brahman, and there are no pluralities.[408][409] Madhva in contrast asserted that Atman (Self) and Brahman are different (both in bondage and liberation[407]), only Vishnu is the Lord (Brahman), individual Selves are also different and depend on Vishnu, and there are pluralities.[408][409] Madhvacharya stated that both Advaita Vedānta and Mahayana Buddhism were a nihilistic school of thought.[410] Madhvacharya wrote four major texts, including Upadhikhandana and Tattvadyota, primarily dedicated to criticizing Advaita.[410]

Followers of ISKCON are highly critical of Advaita Vedānta, regarding it as māyāvāda, identical to Mahayana Buddhism.[web 25][web 26]

Influence on other traditions

Within the ancient and medieval texts of Hindu traditions, such as Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism, the ideas of Advaita Vedānta have had a major influence.[note 69] Advaita Vedānta influenced Krishna Vaishnavism in the different parts of India.[411] One of its most popular text, the Bhagavata Purana, adopts and integrates in Advaita Vedānta philosophy.[412][413][414] The Bhagavata Purana is generally accepted by scholars to have been composed in the second half of 1st millennium CE.[415][416]

In the ancient and medieval literature of Shaivism, called the Āgamas, the influence of Advaita Vedānta is once again prominent.[417][418][419] Of the 92 Āgamas, ten are Dvaita texts, eighteen are Bhedabheda, and sixty-four are Advaita texts.[420][421] According to Natalia Isaeva, there is an evident and natural link between 6th-century Gaudapada's Advaita Vedānta ideas and Kashmir Shaivism.[422]

Shaktism, the Hindu tradition where a goddess is considered identical to Brahman, has similarly flowered from a syncretism of the monist premises of Advaita Vedānta and dualism premises of Samkhya–Yoga school of Hindu philosophy, sometimes referred to as Shaktadavaitavada (literally, the path of nondualistic Shakti).[423][424][425]

Other influential ancient and medieval classical texts of Hinduism such as the Yoga Yajnavalkya, Yoga Vashishta, Avadhuta Gitā, Markandeya Purana and Sannyasa Upanishads predominantly incorporate premises and ideas of Advaita Vedānta.[426][427][428]

History of Advaita Vedānta

Gaudapada, one of the most important pre-Śaṅkara philosophers in Advaita tradition
Main article: History of Advaita Vedanta

Historiography

The historiography of Advaita Vedanta is coloured by Orientalist notions,[429][note 71] while modern formulations of Advaita Vedānta, which developed as a reaction to western Orientalism and Perennialism[431] have "become a dominant force in Indian intellectual thought." [432] According to Michael S. Allen and Anand Venkatkrishnan, "scholars have yet to provide even a rudimentary, let alone comprehensive account of the history of Advaita Vedānta in the centuries leading up to the colonial period." [433]

Early Vedānta

The Upanishads form the basic texts, of which Vedānta gives an interpretation.[434] The Upanishads do not contain "a rigorous philosophical inquiry identifying the doctrines and formulating the supporting arguments".[435][note 72] This philosophical inquiry was performed by the darsanas, the various philosophical schools.[437][note 73]

The Brahma Sutras of Bādarāyana, also called the Vedānta Sutra,[439] were compiled in its present form around 400–450 CE,[440] but "the great part of the Sutra must have been in existence much earlier than that".[440] Estimates of the date of Bādarāyana's lifetime differ between 200 BCE and 200 CE.[441] The Brahma Sutra is a critical study of the teachings of the Upanishads, possibly "written from a Bhedābheda Vedāntic viewpoint." [web 18] Bādarāyana was not the first person to systematise the teachings of the Upanishads.[442] He refers to seven Vedantic teachers before him.[442]

Early Advaita Vedānta

Two Advaita writings predating Maṇḍana Miśra and Shankara were known to scholars such as Nakamura in the first half of 20th-century, namely the Vākyapadīya, written by Bharṭṛhari (second half 5th century[27]), and the Māndūkya-kārikā written by Gauḍapāda (7th century).[28] Later scholarship added the Sannyasa Upanishads (first centuries CE[443]) to the earliest known corpus, some of which are of a sectarian nature,[444] and have a strong Advaita Vedānta outlook.[445][446][447]

According to Nakamura, "there must have been an enormous number of other writings turned out in this period [between the Brahma Sutras and Shankara], but unfortunately all of them have been scattered or lost and have not come down to us today".[28] In his commentaries, Shankara mentions 99 different predecessors of his Sampradaya.[112] In the beginning of his commentary on the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad Shankara salutes

the teachers of the Brahma-vidya Sampradaya.[web 27] Pre-Shankara doctrines and sayings can be traced in the works of the later schools, which does give insight into the development of early Vedānta philosophy.[28]

Gauḍapāda and Māṇḍūkya Kārikā

Main article: Gaudapada

According to tradition, Gauḍapāda (6th century)[448] was the teacher of Govinda Bhagavatpada and the grandteacher of Shankara. Gauḍapāda wrote or compiled[449] the Māṇḍūkya Kārikā, also known as the Gauḍapāda Kārikā or the Āgama Sāstra.[450] The Māṇḍūkya Kārikā is a commentary in verse form on the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad, one of the shortest Upanishads consisting of just 13 prose sentences. Of the ancient literature related to Advaita Vedānta, the oldest surviving complete text is the Māṇḍūkya Kārikā.[451] The Māṇḍūkya Upanishad was considered to be a Śruti before the era of Adi Shankara, but not treated as particularly important.[450] In later post-Shankara period its value became far more important, and regarded as expressing the essence of the Upanishad philosophy. The entire Karika became a key text for the Advaita school in this later era.[452][note 74]

Gaudapada took over the Yogachara teaching of vijñapti-mātra, "representation-only," which states that the empirical reality that we experience is a fabrication of the mind, experienced by consciousness-an-sich,[144][note 75] and the four-cornered negation, which negates any positive predicates of 'the Absolute'.[144][145][note 76] Gaudapada "wove [both doctrines] into the philosophy of Mandukaya Upanisad, which was further developed by Shankara".[455][note 77] In this view,

the ultimate ontological reality is the pure consciousness, which is bereft of attributes and intentionality. The world of duality is nothing but a vibration of the mind (manodṛśya or manaspaṇḍita). The pluralistic world is imagined by the mind (saṁkalpa) and this false projection is sponsored by the illusory factor called māyā.[web 28]

Gauḍapāda uses the concepts of Ajātivāda to explain that 'the Absolute' is not subject to birth, change and death. The Absolute is aja, the unborn eternal.[457] The empirical world of appearances is considered unreal, and not absolutely existent.[457]

Early medieval period - Maṇḍana Miśra and Adi Shankara

Maṇḍana Miśra

Maṇḍana Miśra, an older contemporary of Shankara,[458] was a Mimamsa scholar and a follower of Kumarila, but also wrote a seminal text on Advaita that has survived into the modern era, the Brahma-siddhi.[459][460] According to Fiordalis, he was influenced by the Yoga-tradition, and with that indirectly by Buddhism, given the strong influence of Buddhism on the Yoga-tradition.[43] For a couple of centuries he seems to have been regarded as "the most important representative of the Advaita position,"[35][184][note 78] and the "theory of error" set forth in the Brahma-siddhi became the normative Advaita Vedanta theory of error.[461]

Adi Shankara

Main article: Adi Shankara

See also: Late-Classical Age and Hinduism in the Middle Ages

Very little is known about Shankara. According to Dalal, "Hagiographical accounts of his life, the Śaṅkaravijayas ("Conquests of Śaṅkara"), were composed several centuries after his death,"[web 6] in the 14th to 17th century, and established Shankara as a rallying symbol of values in a time when most of India was conquered by Muslims.[34] He is often considered to be the founder of the Advaita Vedānta school, but was actually a systematizer, not a founder.[web 6][462]

Systematizer of Advaita thought

Shankara was a scholar who synthesized and systematized Advaita-vāda thought which already existed at his lifetime.[462] According to Nakamura, comparison of the known teachings of the early Vedantins and Shankara's thought shows that most of the characteristics of Shankara's thought "were advocated by someone before Śaṅkara".[462] According to Nakamura, after the growing influence of Buddhism on Vedānta, culminating in the works of Gauḍapāda, Adi Shankara gave a Vedantic character to the Buddhist elements in these works,[463] synthesising and rejuvenating the doctrine of Advaita.[464] According to Koller, using ideas in ancient Indian texts, Shankara systematized the foundation for Advaita Vedānta in the 8th century, reforming Badarayana's Vedānta tradition.[465] According to Mayeda, Shankara represents a turning point in the development of Vedānta,[463] yet he also notices that it is only since Deussens's praise that Shankara "has usually been regarded as the greatest philosopher of India." [466] Mayeda further notes that Shankara was primarily concerned with moksha, "and not with the establishment of a complete system of philosophy or theology,"[466] following Potter, who qualifies Shankara as a "speculative philosopher." [467] Lipner notes that Shankara's "main literary approach was commentarial and hence perforce disjointed rather than procedurally systematic [...] though a systematic philosophy can be derived from Samkara's thought." [468]

Writings

Main article: Adi Shankara bibliography

Adi Shankara is best known for his reviews and commentaries (Bhasyas) on ancient Indian texts. His Brahmasutrabhasya (literally, commentary on Brahma Sutra) is a fundamental text of the Vedānta school of Hinduism.[339] His commentaries on ten Mukhya (principal) Upanishads are also considered authentic by scholars.[339][469] Other authentic works of Shankara include commentaries on the Bhagavad Gītā (part of his Prasthanā Traya Bhasya).[139] He also authored Upadesasahasri, his most important original philosophical work.[465][470] The authenticity of Shankara being the author of Vivekacūḍāmaṇi[471] has been questioned, and "modern scholars tend to reject its authenticity as a work by Shankara." [472]

Influence of Shankara

While Shankara has an unparalleled status in the history of Advaita Vedānta, scholars have questioned the traditional narrative of Shankara's early influence in India.[34][35]

[184] Until the 10th century Shankara was overshadowed by his older contemporary Maṇḍana Miśra, who was considered to be the major representative of Advaita.[35][184] Only when Vacaspati Misra, an influential student of Maṇḍana Miśra, harmonised the teachings of Shankara with those of Maṇḍana Miśra, Shankara's teachings gained prominence.[473] Some modern Advaitins argue that most of post-Shankara Advaita Vedanta actually deviates from Shankara, and that only his student Suresvara, who's had little influence, represents Shankara correctly.[474] In this view, Shankara's influential student Padmapada misunderstood Shankara, while his views were maintained by the Suresvara school.[474] According to Satchidanandendra Sarasvati, "almost all the later Advaitins were influenced by Mandana Misra and Bhaskara." [475] [note 9] Until the 11th century, Vedanta itself was a peripheral school of thought; [476] Vedanta became a major influence when Vedanta philosophy was utilized by various sects of Hinduism to ground their doctrines, [396] such as Ramanuja (11th c.), who aligned bhakti, "the major force in the religions of Hinduism," with philosophical thought, meanwhile rejecting Shankara's views.[web 29]

The cultural influence of Shankara and Advaita Vedanta started only centuries later, in the Vijayanagara Empire in the 14th century, [34][477][478] when Sringeri matha started to receive patronage from the kings of the Vijayanagara Empire and became a powerful institution. [479] Vidyaranya, also known as Madhava, who was the Jagadguru of the Śringeri Śāraḍa Pīṭham from ca. 1374–1380 to 1386 [479] played a central role in this growing influence of Advaita Vedanta, and the deification of Shankara as a ruler-renunciate. [34][477][480][481] From 1346 onwards Sringeri matha received patronage from the Vijayanagara kings, and its importance and influence grew rapidly in the second half of the 14th century. [479][note 79] Vidyaranya and the Sringeri matha competed for royal patronage and converts with Srivaisnava Visistadvaita, which was dominant in territories conquered by the Vijayanagara Empire, [483] and Madhava (the pre-ordination name of Vidyaranya) presented Shankara's teachings as the summit of all darsanas, portraying the other darsanas as partial truths which converged in Shankara's teachings. [346] The subsequent Shankara Digvijayam genre, following the example of the earlier Madhva Digvijayam, [484] presented Shankara as a ruler-renunciate, conquering the four quarters of India and bringing harmony. [480][481] The genre created legends to turn Shankara into a "divine folk-hero who spread his teaching through his digvijaya ("universal conquest") all over India like a victorious conqueror." [346][482]

Shankara's position was further established in the 19th and 20th century, when neo-Vedantins and western Orientalists, following Vidyaranya, elevated Advaita Vedanta "as the connecting theological thread that united Hinduism into a single religious tradition." [485] Shankara became "an iconic representation of Hindu religion and culture," despite the fact that most Hindus do not adhere to Advaita Vedanta. [486]

Advaita Vedanta sub-schools

Two defunct schools are the Pancapadika and Istasiddhi, which were replaced by Prakasatman's Vivarana school. [187] The still existing Bhāmatī and Vivarana developed

in the 11th-14th century.[web 30][112] These schools worked out the logical implications of various Advaita doctrines. Two of the problems they encountered were the further interpretations of the concepts of māyā and avidya.[web 30]

Padmapada (c. 800 CE),[487] the founder of the defunct Pancapadika school, was a direct disciple of Shankara. He wrote the Pancapadika, a commentary on the Sankara-bhaya.[487] Padmapada diverged from Shankara in his description of avidya, designating prakṛti as avidya or ajnana.[488]

Sureśvara (fl. 800–900 CE)[489] was a contemporary of Shankara,[458] and often (incorrectly) identified with Maṇḍana Miśra.[458][note 80] Sureśvara has also been credited as the founder of a pre-Shankara branch of Advaita Vedānta.[489]

Mandana Mishra's student Vachaspati Miśra (9th/10th century CE),[490][491][492] who is believed to have been an incarnation of Shankara to popularize the Advaita view,[493] wrote the Bhamati, a commentary on Shankara's Brahma Sutra Bhashya, and the Brahmatattva-samiksa, a commentary on Mandana Mishra's Brahma-siddhi. His thought was mainly inspired by Mandana Miśra, and harmonises Shankara's thought with that of Mandana Miśra.[494][web 30] The Bhamati school takes an ontological approach. It sees the Jiva as the source of avidya.[web 30] It sees contemplation as the main factor in the acquirement of liberation, while the study of the Vedas and reflection are additional factors.[495][496]

Vimuktatman (c. 1200 CE)[497] wrote the Ista-siddhi.[497] It is one of the four traditional siddhi, together with Mandana's Brahma-siddhi, Suresvara's Naiskarmya-siddhi, and Madusudana's Advaita-siddhi.[498] According to Vimuktatman, absolute Reality is "pure intuitive consciousness".[499] His school of thought was eventually replaced by Prakasatman's Vivarana school.[187]

Prakasatman (c. 1200–1300)[187] wrote the Pancapadika-Vivarana, a commentary on the Pancapadika by Padmapadacharya.[187] The Vivarana lends its name to the subsequent school. According to Roodurmun, "[H]is line of thought [...] became the leitmotif of all subsequent developments in the evolution of the Advaita tradition." [187] The Vivarana school takes an epistemological approach. It is distinguished from the Bhamati school by its rejection of action and favouring Vedic study and "a direct apprehension of Brahma." [495] Prakasatman was the first to propound the theory of mulavidya or maya as being of "positive beginningless nature", [500] and sees Brahman as the source of avidya. Critics object that Brahman is pure consciousness, so it cannot be the source of avidya. Another problem is that contradictory qualities, namely knowledge and ignorance, are attributed to Brahman.[web 30]

Another late figure which is widely associated with Advaita and was influential on late Advaita thought was Śrīharṣa.

Late medieval India - yogic Advaita

Michael S. Allen and Anand Venkatkrishnan note that Shankara is very well-studied, but "scholars have yet to provide even a rudimentary, let alone comprehensive account of the history of Advaita Vedānta in the centuries leading up to the colonial period." [433]

While indologists like Paul Hacker and Wilhelm Halbfass took Shankara's system as the measure for an "orthodox" Advaita Vedānta, the living Advaita Vedānta tradition in medieval times was influenced by, and incorporated elements from, the yogic tradition and texts like the Yoga Vasistha and the Bhagavata Purana. [44] Yoga and samkhya had become minor schools of thought since the time of Shankara, and no longer posed a threat for the sectarian identity of Advaita, in contrast to the Vaishnava traditions. [478]

The Yoga Vasistha became an authoritative source text in the Advaita vedānta tradition in the 14th century, and the "yogic Advaita" [501][502] of Vidyāraṇya's Jivanmuktiviveka (14th century) was influenced by the (Laghu-)Yoga-Vasistha, which in turn was influenced by Kashmir Shaivism. [503] Vivekananda's 19th century emphasis on nirvikalpa samadhi was preceded by medieval yogic influences on Advaita Vedānta. In the 16th and 17th centuries, some Nath and hatha yoga texts also came within the scope of the developing Advaita Vedānta tradition. [65]

According to Andrew Nicholson, it was with the arrival of Islamic rule, first in the form of Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire, and the subsequent persecution of Indian religions, that Hindu scholars began a self-conscious attempts to define an identity and unity. [504][505] Between the twelfth and the fourteenth century, this effort emerged with the "astika and nastika" schema of classifying Indian philosophy. [504]

Vidyāraṇya

It is only during this period that the historical fame and cultural influence of Shankara and Advaita Vedanta was established. [34][477][478] Advaita Vedanta's position as most influential Hindu darsana took shape as Advaitins in the Vijayanagara Empire competed for patronage from the royal court, and tried to convert others to their sect. [483] Sringeri matha started to receive patronage from the kings of the Vijayanagara Empire [184][34][479][477] who shifted their allegiance from Advaitic Agamic Shaivism to Brahmanical Advaita orthodoxy. [506]

Central in this repositioning was Vidyāraṇya, [34][477] also known as Madhava, who was the Jagadguru of the Śringeri Śārada Pīṭham from 1380 to 1386 [507] and a minister in the Vijayanagara Empire. [508] He inspired the re-creation of the Hindu Vijayanagara Empire of South India, in response to the devastation caused by the Islamic Delhi Sultanate, [34][477][478][508] but his efforts were also targeted at Srivaishnava groups, especially Visistadvaita, which was dominant in territories conquered by the Vijayanagara Empire. [509] Sects competed for patronage from the royal court, and tried to convert others to their own sectarian system, and Vidyaranya efforts were aimed at promoting Advaita Vedanta. [483] Most of Shankara's biographies were created and published from the 14th to the 17th century, such as the widely cited Śankara-vijaya, in which legends were created to turn Shankara into a "divine folk-hero who spread his

teaching through his digvijaya ("universal conquest") all over India like a victorious conqueror."[346][482][510]

Vidyaranya and his brothers wrote extensive Advaitic commentaries on the Vedas and Dharma to make "the authoritative literature of the Aryan religion" more accessible.[346] In his doxography Sarvadarśanaśaṅgraha ("Summary of all views") Vidyaranya presented Shankara's teachings as the summit of all darsanas, presenting the other darsanas as partial truths which converged in Shankara's teachings, which was regarded to be the most inclusive system.[511][346] The Vaishanava traditions of Dvaita and Viśiṣṭadvaita were not classified as Vedānta, and placed just above Buddhism and Jainism, reflecting the threat they posed for Vidyaranya's Advaita allegiance.[47] Bhedābheda wasn't mentioned at all, "literally written out of the history of Indian philosophy." [512] Vidyaranya became head of Sringeri matha, proclaiming that it was established by Shankara himself.[346][482] Vidyaranya enjoyed royal support,[508] and his sponsorship and methodical efforts helped establish Shankara as a rallying symbol of values, spread historical and cultural influence of Shankara's Vedānta philosophies, and establish monasteries (mathas) to expand the cultural influence of Shankara and Advaita Vedānta.[34]

Modern Advaita

Nīścaldās and "Greater" Advaita

Michael S. Allen has written on the influence and popularity of Advaita Vedānta in early modern north India, especially on the work of the Advaita Dādū-panthī monk Nīścaldās (ca. 1791–1863), author of The Ocean of Inquiry (Hindi: Vichāra-sāgara), a vernacular compendium of Advaita.[25] According to Allen, the work of Nīścaldās "was quite popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it was translated into over eight languages and was once referred to by Vivekananda as having 'more influence in India than any [book] that has been written in any language within the last three centuries.'"[25]

Allen highlights the widespread prominence in early modern India of what he calls "Greater Advaita Vedānta" which refers to popular Advaita works, including "narratives and dramas, "eclectic" works blending Vedānta with other traditions, and vernacular works such as The Ocean of Inquiry." [25] Allen refers to several popular late figures and texts which draw on Advaita Vedānta, such as the Maharashtrian sant Eknāth (16th c.), the popular Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa (ca. late 15th c.), which synthesizes Rama bhakti and advaita metaphysics and the Tripurā-rahasya (a tantric text that adopts an advaita metaphysics).[25] Other important vernacular Advaita figures include the Hindu authors Manohardās and Māṇakdās (who wrote the Ātma-bodh). Advaita literature was also written in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, and Oriya.[25]

Neo-Vedānta

Mahatma Gandhi stated "I am an advaitist".[513][514]

Main articles: Neo-Vedanta and Hindu nationalism

According to King, with the consolidation of the British imperialist rule the new rulers started to view Indians through the "colonially crafted lenses" of Orientalism. In response Hindu nationalism emerged, striving for socio-political independence and countering the influence of Christian missionaries.[515] Among the colonial era intelligentsia the monistic Advaita Vedānta has been a major ideological force for Hindu nationalism,[516] with Hindu intellectuals formulating a "humanistic, inclusivist" response, now called Neo-Vedānta, attempting to respond to this colonial stereotyping of "Indian culture [as] backward, superstitious and inferior to the West." [517]

Due to the influence of Vidyaranya's Sarvadarśanaśaṅgraha, early Indologists regarded Advaita Vedanta as the most accurate interpretation of the Upanishads.[47] Vedānta came to be regarded, both by westerners as by Indian nationalists, as the essence of Hinduism, and Advaita Vedānta came to be regarded as "then paradigmatic example of the mystical nature of the Hindu religion" and umbrella of "inclusivism".[518] Colonial era Indian thinkers, such as Vivekananda, presented Advaita Vedānta as an inclusive universal religion, a spirituality that in part helped organize a religiously infused identity. It also aided the rise of Hindu nationalism as a counter weight to Islam-infused Muslim communitarian organizations such as the Muslim League, to Christianity-infused colonial orientalism and to religious persecution of those belonging to Indian religions.[519][505] [520] Neo-Vedānta subsumed and incorporated Buddhist ideas thereby making the Buddha a part of the Vedānta tradition, all in an attempt to reposition the history of Indian culture.[431] This view on Advaita Vedānta, according to King, "provided an opportunity for the construction of a nationalist ideology that could unite Hindus in their struggle against colonial oppression".[521]

Vivekananda discerned a universal religion, regarding all the apparent differences between various traditions as various manifestations of one truth.[522] Vivekananda emphasised nirvikalpa samadhi as the spiritual goal of Vedānta, he equated it to the liberation in Yoga and encouraged Yoga practice which he called Raja yoga.[523][note 81] With the efforts of Vivekananda, modern formulations of Advaita Vedānta have "become a dominant force in Indian intellectual thought", though Hindu beliefs and practices are diverse.[432]

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, first a professor at Oxford University and later a President of India, further popularized Advaita Vedānta, presenting it as the essence of Hinduism. [web 31] According to Michael Hawley, Radhakrishnan saw other religions, as well as "what Radhakrishnan understands as lower forms of Hinduism," as interpretations of Advaita Vedānta, thereby "in a sense Hindusizing all religions".[web 31] Radhakrishnan metaphysics was grounded in Advaita Vedānta, but he reinterpreted Advaita Vedānta for contemporary needs and context.[web 31][note 82]

Mahatma Gandhi declared his allegiance to Advaita Vedānta, and was another popularizing force for its ideas.[526]

Contemporary Advaita Vedānta

Contemporary teachers are the orthodox Jagadguru of Sringeri Sharada Peetham; the more traditional teachers Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963), Chinmayananda Saraswati (1916-1993),[web 32] Dayananda Saraswati (Arsha Vidya) (1930-2015), Swami Paramarthananda, Swami Tattvavidananda Saraswati, Carol Whitfield (Radha), Sri Vasudevacharya (previously Michael Comans)[web 32] and less traditional teachers such as Narayana Guru.[web 32] According to Sangeetha Menon, prominent names in 20th century Advaita tradition are Shri Chandrashekhara Bharati Mahaswami, Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamikal, Sacchidānandendra Saraswati.[web 33]

Influence on new religious movements

Advaita Vedānta has gained attention in western spirituality and New Age as nondualism, where various traditions are seen as driven by the same non-dual experience.[8] Nonduality points to "a primordial, natural awareness without subject or object".[web 34] It is also used to refer to interconnectedness, "the sense that all things are interconnected and not separate, while at the same time all things retain their individuality".[web 35]

Neo-Advaita is a new religious movement based on a popularised, western interpretation of Advaita Vedānta and the teachings of Ramana Maharshi.[527] Notable neo-advaita teachers are H. W. L. Poonja,[528][527] his students Gangaji[529] Andrew Cohen[[note 83](#)], and Eckhart Tolle.[527]

See also

Cause and effect in Advaita Vedānta

Kashmir Shaivism

Pandeism

Pantheism

Panentheism

Aham Brahmasmi

Ubhay Bharati

Notes

Highest self:

Shankara, Upadesasahasri I.18.3: "I am ever-free, the existent" (Sat). I.18.6: "The two [contradictory] notions "I am the Existent-Brahman" and "I act," have Atman as their witness. It is considered more reasonable to give up only [that one] of the two [notions] which arises from ignorance. I.18.7: "The notion, "I am the Existent," arises from right means of knowledge [while] the other notion has its origin in fallacious means of knowledge." (Mayeda 1992, p. 172)

Brahmajnanavalimala Verse 20: "Brahman is real, the universe is mithya (it cannot be categorized as either real or unreal). The jiva is Brahman itself and not different."

Translation by S. N. Sastri [1]

Sivananda 1993, p. 219: "Brahman (the Absolute) is alone real; this world is unreal; and the Jiva or individual soul is non-different from Brahman."

Menon 2012: "The experiencing self (jīva) and the transcendental self of the Universe

(ātman) are in reality identical (both are Brahman), though the individual self seems different as space within a container seems different from space as such. These cardinal doctrines are represented in the anonymous verse "brahma satyam jagan mithya; jīvo brahmaiva na aparāh" (Brahman is alone True, and this world of plurality is an error; the individual self is not different from Brahman)."

Deutsch 1973, p. 54: "[the] essential status [of the individual human person] is that of unqualified reality, of identity with the Absolute [...] the self (jīva) is only misperceived: the self is really Brahman."

Koller 2013, pp. 100–101: "Atman, which is identical to Brahman, is ultimately the only reality and [...] the appearance of plurality is entirely the work of ignorance [...] the self is ultimately of the nature of Atman/Brahman [...] Brahman alone is ultimately real."

Bowker 2000a, "Advaita Vedānta": "There is only Brahman, which is necessarily undifferentiated. It follows that there cannot even be a difference, or duality, between the human subject, or self, and Brahman, for Brahman must be that very self (since Brahman is the reality underlying all appearance). The goal of human life and wisdom must, therefore, be the realization that the self (ātman) is Brahman."

Hacker (1995, p. 88) notes that Shankara uses two groups of words to denote 'atman': "One group - principally jīva, vijñānatman, and sarīra - expresses the illusory aspect of the soul [...] But in addition there are the two expressions atman and pratyagatman.

These also designate the individual soul, but in its real aspect." Mayeda (1992, pp. 11, 14) uses the word pratyagatman; Sivananda 1993, p. 219), Deutsch (1973, p. 54), and Menon (2012) use the term jīva when referring to the identity of atman and Brahman.

Form of monism:

Malkovsky 2000, p. 71: "The interpretation of advaita that is the most common equates non-duality with monism and acosmic illusionism. Only the Absolute, or the parā brahma, is said to exist; everything else is but an illusory appearance."

Menon 2012: "The essential philosophy of Advaita is an idealist monism, and is considered to be presented first in the Upaniṣads and consolidated in the Brahma Sūtra by this tradition."

King 1995, p. 65: "The prevailing monism of the Upanishads was developed by the Advaita Vedānta to its ultimate extreme."

Mohanty 1980, p. 205: "Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika is realistic; Advaita Vedānta is idealistic. The former is pluralistic, the latter monistic."

Philosophy and spiritual experience:

Deutsch 1988, p. 4: "Advaita Vedānta is more than a philosophical system, as we understand these terms in the West today; it is also a practical guide to spiritual experience and is intimately bound up with spiritual experience."

Puligandla 1997, p. 11: "Any philosophy worthy of its title should not be a mere intellectual exercise but should have practical application in enabling man to live an enlightened life. A philosophy which makes no difference to the quality and style of our life is no philosophy, but an empty intellectual construction."

According to Shankara, in Adhyāsa-bhāṣya (pre-amble to Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya I.1.1), it is self-evident that Ātman, pure awareness or the witness-consciousness, is completely different from non-Ātman, the thinking and acting self and the material world.

Self-luminosity; see Deutsch 1973, p. 48; Dasgupta 1975, pp. 148–149; Indich 2000,

pp. 24, 28; Menon 2012; Ganeri 2019, p. 103; Murti 1983, p. 339; Isaeva 1993, p. 102.

For the translation and meaning of svayam prakāśa:

svayam: "himself, autonomous, in person" (Sanskrit Dictionary for Spoken Sanskrit, svayam Archived 7 December 2021 at the Wayback Machine)

prakāśa: "manifestation," literally "light" or "illumination"; "the capacity to disclose, present, or make manifest" (Fasching 2021 note 1, referring to "MacKenzie 2017, 335; cf. also Ram-Prasad 2007, 53")

Svayam prakāśa can be translated as:

"self-luminous" (Ganeri 2019; Menon 2012)

"self-revealing" (Dasgupta 1975))

"self-manifesting" (Chatterjea 2003, p. 1)

"Self-aware" (Wood 1992, p. 102)

"Immediate" (Murti 1983, p. 339)

On the meaning of svayam prakāśa:

Menezes 2017, p. 198: "Self-luminosity (svayam prakāśa) means self is pure awareness by nature"; idem Ganeri 2019: "self is pure awareness by nature."

Murti 1983, p. 339: "a foundational consciousness [...] to which everything is presented, but is itself no presentation, that which knows all, but is itself no object."

For a detailed treatment, see Mackenzie 2012; Fasching 2011.

For pure Consciousness, also included in the phrase sat-cit-ananda, see Mayeda 1992, p. 103 (verse 1), p.105 (note 1); p.126, verse 7; Deutsch 1973, pp. 48–51; Davis 2010, pp. 34–35; Rambachan 2006, pp. 7, 99–103; Menon 2012; Fasching 2021; Sinha 2016, p. 42.

Shankara, Upadeśasāhasrī I.1.1, translated in Mayeda 1992, p. 103: "Salutation to the all-knowing Pure Consciousness [note 1] which pervades all, is all, abides in the hearts of all beings, and is beyond all objects [of knowledge]. [Note 1 by Mayeda: "The Sanskrit term caitanya translated here as "Pure Consciousness" is used as a synonym for Brahman-Atman, indicating the nature of It."]

Shankara, Upadeśasāhasrī I.11.7, translated in Mayeda 1992, p. 126: "Being different from name, form, and action and by nature constantly free, I am Atman, ie. the highest Brahman; I am Pure Consciousness only and always non-dual."

Deutsch 1973, p. 48: "Atman (or paramatman, the highest Self), for Advaita vedanta, is that pure, undifferentiated, self-shining consciousness, timeless, spaceless, and unthinkable, that is non-different from Brahman and that underlies and supports the individual human person."

Menon 2012: "For classical Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is the fundamental reality underlying all objects and experiences. Brahman is explained as pure existence, pure consciousness and pure bliss. All forms of existence presuppose a knowing self. Brahman or pure consciousness underlies the knowing self. Consciousness according to the Advaita School, unlike the positions held by other Vedānta schools, is not a property of Brahman but its very nature. Brahman is also one without a second, all-pervading and the immediate awareness."

Fasching 2021: "According to Advaita Vedānta, the absolute is pure, qualityless and unchanging consciousness. Our consciousness (the consciousness of individual conscious entities) is not distinct from it, but is nothing other than this absolute itself,

(seemingly) modified by the mental states of respective individual minds."

Sinha 2016, p. 42: "According to the Advaita Vedānta, the Atman is pure, eternal, undifferented consciousness, while the jīva is the pure consciousness limited or determined by the internal organ (antahkarana)."

Potter (2008, p. 136); see Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.51-14; Chandogya Upanishad 8.3.4.

Literally: end or the goal of the Vedas, referring to the Upanishads and their interpretation; it is a tradition of interpretation of the Upanishads, (Nakamura 1990, p. 112) the Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gitā. (Grimes 1990, pp. 6–7, Menon 2012)

King 2002, p. 128: "Although it is common to find Western scholars and Hindus arguing that Sankaracarya was the most influential and important figure in the history of Hindu intellectual thought, this does not seem to be justified by the historical evidence."

Critical scholarship has identified a number of key concepts used in contemporary Advaita Vedānta which differ from Shankara's views, revealing a discrepancy between the nominal adherence to Shankara and the actual alliance with his views. (Suthren Hirst 2005, p. 4, Potter 2006, pp. 6–7)

Some modern Advaitins, specifically Satchidanandendra Sarasvati, argue that most of post-Shankara Advaita Vedanta actually deviates from Shankara, an argument deemed correct by Potter. (Potter 2006, pp. 6–7, Roodurmun 2002, pp. 33–34)

Potter (2006, pp. 6–7): "...these modern interpreters are implying that most Advaitins after Samkara's time are confused and basically mistaken, and that 99% of the extant classical interpretive literature on Samkara's philosophy is off the mark. This is clearly a remarkably radical conclusion. Yet, there is good reason to think that it may well be true."

Satchidanandendra Sarasvati 1997, p. 6: "almost all the later Advaitins were influenced by Mandana Misra and Bhaskara."

Compare, in Buddhism: Subitism, Hongaku ("original enlightenment"), Post-satori practice. See also Nisargadatta Maharaj on 'the bird's way and the ant's way'.

Sringeri matha received patronage from the kings of the Vijayanagara Empire, (Goodding 2013, p. 89) competing with Srivaisnava Visistadvaita groups for royal patronage and converts. (Stoker 2016, pp. 55–56) The works of the influential Advaitin Vidyaranya (Madhava, 14th cent.), jagadguru of Sringeri matha from ca. 1374–1380 to 1386, presented Advaita teachings as the summit of the Indian darśanam, (Hacker 1995, pp. 29–30, Blake Michael 1992, pp. 60–62 with notes 6, 7, and 8, King 2002, p. 128, Roodurmun 2002, pp. 33–34) while the subsequent Shankara Digvijayam genre deified him as a ruler-renunciate who conquered the four quarters. (Nowicka 2016, p. 147, Bader 2001, p. vii) Shankara's prominence was further established in the 19th and 20th century, gaining worldwide fame, in a "confluence of interests" of Western Christian missionaries, the British Raj, and Indian nationalists. (King 2002, pp. 129–135)

See also Purusha.

According to Anantanand Rambachan, advaita describes the relation between Brahman, the origin of everything, and the world and the individual self. This relation is neither one nor two. It is not "one," because "[t]he world, as an effect, originates from Brahman and is dependent on Brahman for its existence." But it is also not "two," because Brahman is "the ultimate ontological ground of the world and the self." [60]

For an alternate English translation: Robert Hume, The Thirteen Principal Upanishads, BU 4.3.32, Oxford University Press, p. 138.

सलिले एकस् द्रष्टा अद्वैतस् भवति एष ब्रह्मलोकस्
सम्राट् ति ह एनम् उवाच अनुशशास याज्ञवल्क्यस्
एषा अस्य परमा गतिस् एषास्य परमा सम्पद्

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.3.32[web 2]

Translation:

An ocean, a single seer without duality becomes he whose world is Brahman,
O King, Yajnavalkya instructed
This is his supreme way. This is his supreme achievement.

—Transl: Stephen Phillips[64][note 14]

A reference to Non-duality is also made in the Chandogya Upanishad, within a dialogue between the Vedic sage Uddalaka Aruni and his son Svetaketu, as follows :

सदेव सोम्येदमग्र आसीत् एकमेवा अद्वितीयम्
तद्वैक आहुरसदेवेदमग्र आसीदेकमेवाद्वितीयं तस्मादसत् सज्जायत

—Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.1[web 3]

Translation:

Somya, before this world was manifest, there was only existence, one without duality
On this subject, some maintain that before this world was manifest, there was only non-existence, one without a second.
Out of that non-existence, existence emerged.

—Chandogya Upanishad

Many of these traditions, which were influential among Neo-Vedantins, did not derive from Vedantic lineages, i.e., the "Advaita Vedanta" of Shankara. As Madaio (2017, p. 4) points out "...it is possible to speak of sanskritic and vernacular advaitic texts (which are either explicitly non-dualistic or permit a non-dualistic reading) and 'Advaita Vedanta' texts which originate within sampradayas that claim an Advaita Vedantic lineage. This, then, avoids the obfuscating tendency to subsume advaitic but non-vedantic works under a 'Vedanta' or 'Advaita Vedanta' umbrella."

King 1995, p. 65: "The prevailing monism of the Upanishads was developed by the Advaita Vedanta to its ultimate extreme."

The suffering created by the workings of the mind entangled with physical reality
Jivanmukti is a state that transforms the nature, attributes and behaviors of an individual. After this transformation, the liberated individual shows attributes such as: (Aiyar 1914, pp. 140–147); (Nikhilananda 1958, pp. 53–79); (Fort 1998)

he is not bothered by disrespect and endures cruel words, treats others with respect regardless of how others treat him;

when confronted by an angry person he does not return anger, instead replies with soft and kind words;

even if tortured, he speaks and trusts the truth;

he does not crave for blessings or expect praise from others;
he never injures or harms any life or being (ahimsa), he is intent in the welfare of all beings;
he is as comfortable being alone as in the presence of others;
he is as comfortable with a bowl, at the foot of a tree in tattered robe without help, as when he is in a mithuna (union of mendicants), grama (village) and nagara (city);
he does not care about or wear sikha (tuft of hair on the back of head for religious reasons), nor the holy thread across his body. To him, knowledge is sikha, knowledge is the holy thread, knowledge alone is supreme. Outer appearances and rituals do not matter to him, only knowledge matters;
for him there is no invocation nor dismissal of deities, no mantra nor non-mantra, no prostrations nor worship of gods, goddess or ancestors, nothing other than knowledge of Self;
he is humble, high spirited, of clear and steady mind, straightforward, compassionate, patient, indifferent, courageous, speaks firmly and with sweet words.

The true Self is itself just that pure consciousness, without which nothing can be known in any way.(...) And that same true Self, pure consciousness, is not different from the ultimate world Principle, Brahman (...) Brahman (=the true Self, pure consciousness) is the only Reality (sat), since It is untinged by difference, the mark of ignorance, and since It is the one thing that is not sublimatable.[77]

Fowler 2002, pp. 30–31, 260–264: "As a philosophical and metaphysical term it [monism] refers to the acceptance of one single, ultimate, principle as the basis of the cosmos, the unity and oneness of all reality (...) [monism] has a model par excellence in that put forward by the eighth-century Indian philosopher Shankara, who is associated with the school of thought of Advaita Vedanta. (p. 263) – "In Shankara's words: 'the notions oneself and one's own are indeed falsely constructed (upon Atman) through nescience. When there is (the knowledge of) the oneness of Atman, these notions certainly do not exist. If the seed does not exist, whence shall the fruit arise?'"

See also kelamuni (2006), The Philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya, section "II. The Threefold Means," on Brahma Sutra Bhashya 4.1.2 and subitism.

These characteristics and steps are described in various Advaita texts, such as by Shankara in Chapter 1.1 of Brahmasutrabhasya,[84] and in the Bhagavad Gita Chapter 10

Example self-restraints mentioned in Hindu texts: one must refrain from any violence that causes injury to others, refrain from starting or propagating deceit and falsehood, refrain from theft of others' property, refrain from sexually cheating on one's partner, and refrain from avarice.[101][102][103]

See also kelamuni (2006), The Philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya, section "II. The Threefold Means," on Brahma Sutra Bhashya 4.1.2 and subitism.

Mayeda refers to statements from Shankara regarding epistemology (pramana-janya) in section 1.18.133 of Upadesasahasri, and section 1.1.4 of Brahmasutra-bhasya.[118] [119] NB: some manuscripts list Upadesasahasri verse 1.18.133 as 2.18.133, while Mayeda lists it as 1.18.133, because of interchanged chapter numbering.[120][121]

See also ramesam, AtmA anubhava / anubhUti (blog).

Sharma 2000, p. 177 refers to Brahma Sutra Bhashya 4.1.15, "which tradition views as

an allusion to his own direct experience of the ultimate truth." It runs as follows: [...] How can one contest the heart-felt cognition of another as possessing brahman-knowledge, even though bearing a body?

1. Something is. 2. It is not. 3. It both is and is not. 4. It neither is nor is not.[146]

"Consciousness",[162][web 8] "intelligence",[163][161] "wisdom"

"the Absolute",[162][web 8] "infinite",[web 8] "the Highest truth"[web 8]

While the Vedanta tradition equates sat ("the Existent") with Brahman, the Chandogya Upanishad itself does not refer to Brahman.[19][155] Deutsch & Dalvi (2004, p. 8):

"Although the text does not use the term brahman, the Vedanta tradition is that the Existent (sat) referred to is no other than Brahman."

Shankara, himself, had renounced all religious ritual acts;[191]

For an example of Shankara's reasoning "why rites and ritual actions should be given up",[192] Elsewhere, Shankara's Bhasya on various Upanishads repeat "give up rituals and rites".[193]

Compare Mookerji 2011 on Svādhyāya (Vedic learning). Mookerji (2011, pp. 29–31) notes that the Rigveda, and Sayana's commentary, contain passages criticizing as fruitless mere recitation of the Ṛik (words) without understanding their inner meaning or essence, the knowledge of dharma and Parabrahman. Mookerji (2011, pp. 29, 34) concludes that in the Rigvedic education of the mantras "the contemplation and comprehension of their meaning was considered as more important and vital to education than their mere mechanical repetition and correct pronunciation." Mookerji (2011, p. 35) refers to Sayana as stating that "the mastery of texts, akshara-prapti, is followed by artha-bodha, perception of their meaning." (Artha may also mean "goal, purpose or essence," depending on the context.[194][web 10]) According to Mookerji (2011, p. 36), "the realization of Truth" and the knowledge of paramatman as revealed to the rishis is the real aim of Vedic learning, and not the mere recitation of texts.

Up.I.18.219: "The renunciation of all actions becomes the means for discriminating the meaning of the word "Thou" since there is an [Upanisadic] teaching, "Having become calm, self-controlled [...], one sees Atman there in oneself]" (Bhr. Up. IV, 4, 23)."[202]

It is not a philosophy in the western meaning of the word, according to Milne.[215]

Reason clarifies the truth and removes objections, according to the Advaita school, however it believes that pure logic cannot lead to philosophical truths and only experience and meditative insights do. The Sruti, it believes is a collection of experience and meditative insights about liberating knowledge,[227]

Sharma 1993, pp. 72–83: "According to Advaita, the pure subject is our true self whose knowledge is liberative, (...) If the subject could be realised in its purity then all misery would cease: this is called self-knowledge"

Timalsina 2008, p. xvii: "Advaita can be approached from various angles. Not only are there multiple interpretations of Advaita, there are different starting points from which one can arrive at the conclusion of non-duality".

Atman, Oxford Dictionaries, Oxford University Press (2012), Quote: "1. real self of the individual; 2. a person's soul"

Payne 2005, pp. 199–200 with p. 215 notes 5, 6: "A fourth metaphor is the monistic equation of the true or absolute self (atman) with absolute being (Brahman). In general, then, the conception of the self that emerges is one in which the self is in some way

permanent, eternal, absolute or unchanging. It is also simultaneously universal and individual. The view is that there is an essence and that it can be known."

Soul:

Atman, Oxford Dictionaries, Oxford University Press (2012), Quote: "1. real self of the individual; 2. a person's soul"

David Lorenzen (2004), The Hindu World (Editors: Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby), Routledge, ISBN 0-415215277, pp. 208–209, Quote: "Advaita and nirguni movements, on the other hand, stress an interior mysticism in which the devotee seeks to discover the identity of individual soul (atman) with the universal ground of being (brahman) or to find god within himself";

Richard King (1995), Early Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism, State University of New York Press, ISBN 978-0791425138, p. 64, Quote: "Atman as the innermost essence or soul of man, and Brahman as the innermost essence and support of the universe. (...) Thus we can see in the Upanishads, a tendency towards a convergence of microcosm and macrocosm, culminating in the equating of atman with Brahman".

Chad Meister (2010), The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity, Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0195340136, p. 63; Quote: "Even though Buddhism explicitly rejected the Hindu ideas of Atman (soul) and Brahman, Hinduism treats Sakyamuni Buddha as one of the ten avatars of Vishnu."

Olivelle (1998, p. 77);

Sanskrit (Wikisource): प्राणोऽपानो व्यान इत्यष्टावक्षराणि अष्टाक्षर ह वा एकं गायत्र्यै पदम् एतदु हैवास्या एतत् स यावदिदं प्राणि तावद्ध जयति योऽस्या एतदेवं पदं वेद अथास्या एतदेव तुरीयं दर्शितं पदं परोरजा य एष तपति यद्वै चतुर्थं तत्तुरीयम् दर्शितं पदमिति ददृश इव ह्येष परोरजा इति सर्वमु ह्येवैष रज उपर्युपरि तपत्य एव हैव श्रिया यशसा तपति योऽस्या एतदेवं पदं वेद ॥ ३ ॥

Compare Fasching 2021: For Advaita Vedānta, consciousness is to be distinguished from all contents of consciousness that might be introspectively detectable: It is precisely consciousness of whatever contents it is conscious of and not itself one of these contents. Its only nature is, Advaita holds, prakāśa (manifestation); in itself it is devoid of any content or structure and can never become an object.

Brahman is also defined as:

The unchanging, infinite, immanent, and transcendent reality which is all matter, energy, time, space, being, and everything beyond in this Universe; that is the one supreme, universal spirit without a second.(Brodd (2003); Vachatimanont (2005, pp. 47–48))

Bowker 2003, "Brahman": "(Skt., literally, 'growth' or 'expansion'). The one supreme, all pervading Spirit that is the origin and support of the phenomenal universe."

Puligandla 1997, p. 222 The supreme self. Puligandla states it as "the unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world."

The Self-existent, the Absolute and the Imperishable. Brahman is indescribable.Fowler 2005, p. 30: "Upanisadic thought is anything but consistent; nevertheless, there is a common focus on the acceptance of a totally transcendent Absolute, a trend which arose in the Vedic period. This indescribable Absolute is called Brahman [...]."

It provides the "stuff" from which everything is made

It sets everything into working, into existence

Gambhirananda: "That (is Brahman) from which (are derived) the birth etc. of this

(universe)."[283]

Svarupalakshana, qualities, definition based on essence

The Advaitin scholar Madhusudana Sarasvati explained Brahman as the Reality that is simultaneously an absence of falsity (sat), absence of ignorance (cit), and absence of sorrow/self-limitation (ananda).[286]

Compare Parable of the Poisoned Arrow

These concepts are discussed in ancient and medieval texts of Hinduism, and other Indian religions, using synonymous terms. Cause is referred to as kārāṇa (कारण), nidana (निदान), hetu (हेतु) or mulam (मूलम्), while effect is referred to as kārya (कार्य), phala (फल), parinam (परिणाम) or Shungam (शुङ्ग).[web 17][309]

Advaita furthermore states that effect (kārya) is non-different from cause (kārāṇa), but the cause is different from the effect. This principle is called kārya-kārāṇa ananyatva. When the cause is destroyed, the effect will no longer exist. For example, cotton cloth is the effect of the cotton threads, which is the material cause. Without threads there will be no cotton cloth. Without cotton there will be no thread. According to Swami Sivananda, in his comments on the Brahmasūtra-Bhāṣya 2.1.9, Adi Shankara describes this as follows:

ananyatve'pi kāryakārāṇayoḥ kāryasya kārāṇātmatvaṃ na tu kārāṇasya kāryātmatvaṃ
Despite the non-difference of cause and effect, the effect has its self in the cause but not the cause in the effect.

The effect is of the nature of the cause and not the cause the nature of the effect.

Therefore the qualities of the effect cannot touch the cause.[web 19]

According to Eliot Deutsch, Advaita Vedānta states that from "the standpoint of Brahman-experience and Brahman itself, there is no creation" in the absolute sense, all empirically observed creation is relative and mere transformation of one state into another, all states are provisional and a cause-effect driven modification.[311]

According to Hugh Nicholson, "the definitive study on the development of the concept of vivarta in Indian philosophy, and in Advaita Vedanta in particular, remains Hacker's Vivarta.[313] According to Hacker, "the word maya has for [Shankara] hardly any terminological weight." [314]

Compare the misunderstanding of Yogacharas concept of vijñapti-mātra, 'representation-only', as 'consciousness-only'.

Śaṅkarācārya 1949, p. 32;

Sanskrit: तच् चैतत् परमार्थदर्शनं प्रतिपत्तुमिच्छता वर्णाश्रमाद्यभिमान-कृतपाञ्चत्तरूपपुत्रवित्तलोकैषणादिभ्यो व्युत्थानं कर्तव्यम् । सम्यक्प्रत्ययविरोधात् तदभिमानस्य भेददर्शनप्रतिषेधार्थोपपत्तिश्चोपपद्यते । न ह्येकस्मिन्नात्मन्यसंसारित्वबुद्धौ शास्त्रन्यायोत्पादितायां तद्विपरीता बुद्धिर्भवति । न ह्यग्नी शितत्वबुद्धिः, शरीरे वाजरामरणबुद्धिः । तस्मादविद्याकार्यत्वात् सर्वकर्मणां तत्साधनानां च यज्ञोपवीतादीनां परमार्थदर्शनिष्टेन त्यागः कर्तव्यः ॥ ४४ ॥

Many in number, the Upanishads developed in different schools at various times and places, some in the Vedic period and others in the medieval or modern era (the names of up to 112 Upanishads have been recorded).[327] All major commentators have considered the twelve to thirteen oldest of these texts as the principal Upanishads and as the foundation of Vedanta.

The Śruti includes the four Vedas including its four layers of embedded texts – the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the early Upanishads.[328]

Sanskrit: श्री संस्थान गौडपादाचार्य मठ, Śrī Sansthāna Gauḍapadācārya Maṭha

Nakamura also recognized the influence of these mathas, which he argues contributed to the influence of Shankara, which was "due to institutional factors". The mathas which he established remain active today, and preserve the teachings and influence of Shankara, "while the writings of other scholars before him came to be forgotten with the passage of time".[347]

According to Pandey, these Mathas were not established by Shankara himself, but were originally ashrams established by Vibhāṇḍaka and his son Ṛṣyaśṛṅga.[348] Shankara inherited the ashrams at Dvārakā and Śringeri, and shifted the ashram at Śṛṅgaverapura to Badarikāśrama, and the ashram at Angadeśa to Jagannātha Purī.[349]

Sanskrit.org: "Advaitins are non-sectarian, and they advocate worship of Siva and Visnu equally with that of the other deities of Hinduism, like Sakti, Ganapati and others."[web 22]

Archeological evidence suggest that the Smarta tradition in India dates back to at least 3rd-century CE.[351][352]

Practically, Shankara fostered a rapprochement between Advaita and smarta orthodoxy, which by his time had not only continued to defend the varnasramadharma theory as defining the path of karman, but had developed the practice of pancayatanapuja ("five-shrine worship") as a solution to varied and conflicting devotional practices. Thus one could worship any one of five deities (Vishnu, Siva, Durga, Surya, Ganesa) as one's istadevata ("deity of choice").[358]

Helmuth von Glasenapp (1995), Vedānta & Buddhism: A comparative study, Buddhist Publication Society, pages 2-3, Quote: "Vedānta and Buddhism have lived side by side for such a long time that obviously they must have influenced each other. The strong predilection of the Indian mind for a doctrine of universal unity has led the representatives of Mahāyāna to conceive Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa as two aspects of the same and single true reality; for Nāgārjuna the empirical world is a mere appearance, as all dharmas, manifest in it, are perishable and conditioned by other dharmas, without having any independent existence of their own. Only the indefinable "Voidness" (Śūnyatā) to be grasped in meditation, and realized in Nirvāṇa, has true reality [in Buddhism]".

This development did not end with Advaita Vedānta but continued in Tantrism and various schools of Shaivism. Non-dual Kashmir Shaivism, for example, was influenced by, and took over doctrines from, several orthodox and heterodox Indian religious and philosophical traditions.[367] These include the orthodox Hindu schools of Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Patañjali's Yoga tradition, and Nyāya, and prominent Buddhist schools, including Yogācāra and Mādhyamaka,[367] but also Tantra and the Nath-tradition.[368]

Kalupahana describes how in Buddhism there is also a current which favours substance ontology. Kalupahanan sees Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra as reactions against developments toward substance ontology in Buddhism.[390]

Scholars are divided on the historical influence of Advaita Vedānta. Some Indologists

state that it is one of the most studied Hindu philosophy and the most influential schools of classical Indian thought:

Indich 2000, pp. 57–60

Brannigan 2009, p. 19: "Advaita Vedanta is the most influential philosophical system in Hindu thought."

Deutsch 1969, p. 3: "[Advaita Vedānta] has been and continues to be the most widely accepted system of thought among philosophers in India, and it is, we believe, one of the greatest philosophical achievements to be found in the East or the West."

See also Devdutt Pattanaik (August 30, 2020), Who is a Hindu? - What they don't tell you about Advaita Archived 19 December 2021 at the Wayback Machine, Mumbai Mirror.

In the Orientalist view, the medieval Muslim period was a time of stagnation and cultural degeneration, in which the original purity of the Upanisadic teachings, systematized by philosophers like Shankara, was lost. In this view, "the genuine achievements of Indian civilization" were recovered during the British colonial rule of India, due to the efforts of western Indologists, who viewed Advaita Vedanta as the authentic philosophy of the Upanishads, and Shankara as its greatest exponent.[429][note 70] While this view has been criticised by postcolonial studies and critiques of Orientalism, "in some corners of the academy, the Orientalists' understanding of premodern Indian history has so far escaped thorough reexamination."[430]

Nevertheless, Balasubramanian argues that since the basic ideas of the Vedanta systems are derived from the Vedas, the Vedantic philosophy is as old as the Vedas. [436]

Deutsch and Dalvi point out that, in the Indian context, texts "are only part of a tradition which is preserved in its purest form in the oral transmission as it has been going on." [438]

Nakamura notes that there are contradictions in doctrine between the four chapters. [449]

It is often used interchangeably with the term *citta-mātra*, but they have different meanings. The standard translation of both terms is "consciousness-only" or "mind-only." Several modern researchers object this translation, and the accompanying label of "absolute idealism" or "idealistic monism".[453] A better translation for *vijñapti-mātra* is representation-only.[454]

1. Something is. 2. It is not. 3. It both is and is not. 4. It neither is nor is not.[146][page needed] The 'four-cornered negation' is an English gloss of the Sanskrit, *Chatushkoti*. [citation needed]

The influence of Mahayana Buddhism on other religions and philosophies was not limited to Vedanta. Kalupahana notes that the *Visuddhimagga* – a Theravada Buddhist tradition, contains "some metaphysical speculations, such as those of the Sarvastivadins, the Sautrantikas, and even the Yogacarins".[456]

King 2002, p. 128: "Although it is common to find Western scholars and Hindus arguing that Sankaracarya was the most influential and important figure in the history of Hindu intellectual thought, this does not seem to be justified by the historical evidence." [35]

The insignificance of Sringeri matha before this time was such, that Hacker and Kulke & Rothermund have argued that Sringeri matha may have been founded by Vidyaranya

himself, proclaiming that it was established by Shankara himself.[346][482]

Potter 2008, pp. 346–347, 420–423: "There is little firm historical information about Suresvara; tradition holds Suresvara is same as Mandanamisra."

According to Comans, this approach is missing in historic Advaita texts.[524]

Neo-Vedanta seems to be closer to Bhedabheda-Vedanta than to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, with the acknowledgement of the reality of the world. Nicholas F. Gier:

"Ramakrsna, Svami Vivekananda, and Aurobindo (I also include M.K. Gandhi) have been labeled "neo-Vedantists," a philosophy that rejects the Advaitins' claim that the world is illusory. Aurobindo, in his *The Life Divine*, declares that he has moved from Sankara's "universal illusionism" to his own "universal realism" (2005: 432), defined as metaphysical realism in the European philosophical sense of the term." [525]

Presently Cohen has distanced himself from Poonja, and calls his teachings "Evolutionary Enlightenment".[530] What Is Enlightenment, the magazine published by Choen's organisation, has been critical of neo-Advaita several times, as early as 2001. See.[web 36][web 37][web 38]

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 It is the fact that this argument does not contain a premise explicitly asserting that the five skandhas (classes of psychophysical element) are exhaustive of the constituents of

persons, plus the fact that these are all said to be empirically observable, that leads some to claim that the Buddha did not intend to deny the existence of a self tout court. There is, however, evidence that the Buddha was generally hostile toward attempts to establish the existence of unobservable entities. In the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (D I.178–203), for instance, the Buddha compares someone who posits an unseen seer in order to explain our introspective awareness of cognitions, to a man who has conceived a longing for the most beautiful woman in the world based solely on the thought that such a woman must surely exist. And in the Tevijja Sutta (D I.235–52), the Buddha rejects the claim of certain Brahmins to know the path to oneness with Brahman, on the grounds that no one has actually observed this Brahman. This makes more plausible the assumption that the argument has as an implicit premise the claim that there is no more to the person than the five skandhas.

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AI Overview

Vajrayana: The Esoteric or Diamond Vehicle of Buddhism

Vajrayana, the "Diamond Vehicle," is a mystical branch of Mahayana Buddhism using powerful techniques like mantras, mudras (symbolic gestures), and mandalas (cosmic

diagrams) for a faster path to enlightenment, emphasizing guru guidance and deity visualization to realize inherent Buddha-nature. Originating in India, it's prominent in Tibetan Buddhism, utilizing rituals and practices to transform all experiences into the path to awakening, focusing on realizing the union of wisdom (prajna) and skillful means (upaya).

Core Concepts & Practices

Mantra: Sacred syllables or phrases for mental protection and invoking divine energy.

Mandala: Symbolic cosmic maps for visualization, representing Buddha realms.

Mudra: Ritual hand gestures symbolizing enlightened qualities.

Deity Yoga: Visualizing oneself as a deity to embody enlightened qualities.

Guru Yoga: Connecting with a spiritual teacher (guru) to realize one's own Buddha-nature.

Yab-Yum: A symbol of sexual embrace representing the union of wisdom and method.

Key Features

Faster Path: Aims to achieve enlightenment more quickly than traditional methods.

Uses All Experience: Incorporates all aspects of life, including emotions and the world, as part of the path.

Esoteric & Ritualistic: Involves secret teachings, initiations (empowerments), and complex rituals.

Teacher-Dependent: Requires initiation and guidance from a qualified lama or guru.

Relationship to Buddhism

Mahayana Foundation: Builds upon Mahayana philosophy, using its concepts of emptiness (sunyata) and compassion.

Three Vehicles (Yanas): Often seen as the third, most advanced vehicle after Shravakayana and Mahayana.

Tibetan Buddhism: The primary vehicle for Tibetan traditions (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Gelug).

Modern Context

Spread globally after Tibetan refugees fled to India in 1959, bringing teachings to the West.

The Dalai Lama is a prominent leader, offering insights to a worldwide following.

Vajrayana: The Diamond Vehicle | The Pluralism Project

Three terms characterize the practice of Vajrayana, each one of which has overt ritual meanings, inner psychophysical meanings, an...

The Pluralism Project

Vajrayana Buddhism for Beginners - Tricycle: The Buddhist Review

Vajrayana Buddhism is a form of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in India and later spread throughout Buddhist Asia. Centering on ...

Tricycle: The Buddhist Review

A Concise Explanation of Vajrayana Buddhism - From the Pure Land

Mandalas: Cosmic diagrams used for visualization, representing various realms of

Buddhas and bodhisattvas[4]. Mudras: Symbolic han...

Substack

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Vajrayana

Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana>

is a Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition that emphasizes esoteric practices and rituals aimed at rapid spiritual awakening.

Vajrayana Buddhist Council of...

Sudden awakening

Dharani

Deity yoga

People also ask

What is the main belief of Vajrayana Buddhism?

What is the difference between Mahayana and Vajrayana?

Is Buddhism supporting LGBT?

What are the 4 activities of Vajrayana?

Feedback

Vajrayana Buddhism: Beliefs, Meditations, and Practices

Sukhasiddhi Foundation

<https://www.sukhasiddhi.org/blog/vajrayana-buddhis...>

Vajrayana Buddhism teaches that it is possible for one to reach enlightenment in a single lifetime, instead of having to practice ethics, morality, compassion,

Vajrayana: The Diamond Vehicle

The Pluralism Project

<https://pluralism.org/vajrayana-the-diamond-vehicle>

The major stream of Buddhism in Tibet, the Vajrayana emerged in the 7th century out of the Mahayana tradition. This form of Buddhism, sometimes called “Tantric ...

Vajrayana Explained

Lion's Roar

<https://www.lionsroar.com/BD-Articles>

The late Karma Kagyu master Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche presents a clear explanation of the view of Vajrayana and its main practices of generation and completion.

About Vajrayana Now | Vajrayana Now

Vajrayana Now

<https://vajrayananow.com>

Vajrayana is a way of passionate involvement in life, developing competence,

confidence, and kind, effective relationships.

What people are saying

Need some advice on a strange feeling

Popular comment · Most practicing Tibetan Buddhist monasteries aren't in Tibet anymore. Anyway, what do "like" and "dislike" have to do with your practice? Do you practice to satisfy your ego? Your practice would be more sophisticated and profound if you found a community you would actually engage in practice with, regardless of tradition or your likes and dislikes. Edit: of course some temples aren't good fits, but that is very different from like and dislike.

.

10+ comments · 1 day ago

r/Buddhism

Reddit

2:00

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. . This is an excerpt from the Essence of Vajrayana Buddhism course with Mingyur Rinpoche — now available on Vajrayana Online. In this clip, Mingyur Rinpoche teaches that everyone is a buddha — right now, right here. He explai

1K+ reactions · Oct 16, 2025

mingyur.rinpoche · Facebook

Tibetan Buddhist teacher & spiritual leader

Why Emptiness Is Called “Feminine” in Tibetan Buddhism: And She’s Been Waiting For You To Recognize...

Oct 9, 2025

Bern Callahan

Medium

22:00

No One Will Tell You This | Vajrayana’s ULTIMATE Mystery | Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal & Mandarva

17.4K+ views · Oct 18, 2025

Shival Mishra · YouTube

Meditation practitioner

Let's Have a Real Discussion Here - Does Vajrayana Really Works?

Popular comment · reading Dharma benefits you by giving you true teachings on the nature of mind and reality which permeates throughout your life, that is the blessing. There are more blessing that may follow, but a closed off person is not receptive to

them, thus they are “secret” does controlling your anger release you from suffering for yourself and others? Does defeating the enemy wrongdoing or controlling your cravings which bind you to samsara? The Dharma is a blessing. * Mantras interact with the energy system of the body and carry positive energy if done correctly, thus, many spiritual benefits come from them. 2b) karmic purification takes place in the mindstream, you are thinking of the westernized misrepresentation of Karma, the type of karmic purification from mantra and preliminaries is mostly inner. You can plainly observe this. If you need more explanation, feel free to ask. * negative karma requires multiple facets to fulfill, if you aren't aware that you're doing them wrong or you have a lapse in judgement, the negative karma isn't as strong, prostrations are a positive practice that help to subdue the ego and self cherishing mind. 3b no... it's not better to “just not be Buddhist” because you will eventually be faced with your negative karma one way or another and ignoring practice is only allowing it to build and snowball. * I myself went from having \$0 and being miserable living on the streets to making 60k+ per year with a home and vehicle through Buddhist practice.. there's your “proof of material benefit” story. It is not always a benefit in the dualistic sense and your practice must be sincere as well as your samaya * this is a misunderstanding and over generalization therefore it needs no explaining. A lay practitioner should mostly be concerned with the intent and nature of craving behind their sexual activity. Further restriction of sexual activity and sexual practices are for people with empowerment or monastics. * I'm not really sure what you're getting at with this question but it seems to be that if something increases the merit of a virtuous act - why is it not required. There are various practices within Vajrayana and none of it is automatically required, it is more about what fits and benefits the practitioner at where they are in their journey, it's also not something everyone can automatically do. Hope this clears up your confusion and criticism of Vajrayana. I'm really curious what you mean by “does it work” if you could clarify that. It's like asking “does 2+2 work?”. Buddhism is based purely on logic and reason. Cultivating wisdom and compassion makes you wiser and more compassionate. Not acting from self grasping or craving/ignorance reduces suffering. These are plain observable facts, there is no question of “if they work”. It's not a self help program to help you with worldly pursuits. It's a means of mind training, practice, and study for liberation of suffering & cyclic existence for yourself and others completely.

50+ comments · 1 month ago

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Reddit

1:52

#WATCH | Nepal's ancient Charya dance, a sacred Vajrayana Buddhist ritual practised since the 7th century, is performed by Newari Bajracharya and Shakya priests during deity initiations. Costumes, devotional songs, mudras and instruments like the damaru bring deities such as Kumari, Tara, Kurukulle, Saraswati, Kalbhairav and Kali to life. Find clean feed, copyright-free content exclusively on #PBSHABD. Register now at shabd.prasarbharati.org/register #CharyaDance #Nepal #Vajrayana #BuddhistCulture

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Indian news wire

Charya dance of Nepal is a sacred, ritualistic Vajrayana Buddhist dance performed by Newari Bajracharya and Shakya priests. The dance performance was practiced from the 7th Century and was traditionally performed during deity initiations and tantrayana f
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airnewsalerts · Facebook
India-based news organization

0:07

Vajrayoginī (Sanskrit: Vajrayoginī; Tibetan: དོར་ཇེ་ནལ་འབྱུང་མ་, Dorjé Naljorma) is a Tantric Buddhist female Buddha and a Dākinī. Vajrayoginī's essence is "great passion" (maharaga), a transcendent passion that is free of selfishness and illusion — she intensely works for the well-being of others and for the destruction of ego clinging. She is seen as being ideally suited for people with strong passions, providing the way to transform those passions into enlightened virtues. She is an Anuttarayoga Tantra iṣṭadevatā (meditation deity) and her practice includes methods for preventing ordinary death, intermediate state (bardo) and rebirth (by transforming them into paths to enlightenment), and for transforming all mundane daily experiences into higher spiritual paths. Origin and Lineage Vajrayoginī's sādhanā originated in the Himalayan region between the tenth and twelfth centuries. It evolved from the Cakrasaṃvara Tantra, where Vajrayoginī appears as his Yab-Yum consort, to beco
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Tibetan Buddhist statue manufacturer

6:39

Seeing All Beings as Buddhas
11.9K+ views · Oct 14, 2025

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche · YouTube
Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher
Help with Sadhana

Popular comment · Did you actually make a commitment or are you just assuming?
Because getting this kind of practice empowerment doesn't necessarily come with a

commitment. There are plenty of cases where there isn't one. And are you sure that it was not a blessing empowerment, hence no manual was distributed?

.

10+ comments · 1 week ago

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Reddit

0:46

In Vajrayana Buddhism, Vajradhara and Vajradharma may appear similar, yet each carries a profoundly unique role. Vajradhara - the primordial Buddha - embodies the very essence of enlightenment and transmits the sacred tantric teachings.

Vajradharma, in turn, reveals how that ultimate truth unfolds in our spiritual practice, guiding us step by step. Though often mistaken for one another, recognizing their subtle differences opens a deeper doorway to wisdom, compassion, and the transformative journey toward enlightenment. Curious to explore their timeless teachings? Read more on our blog - link in bio. 📞 KU: 22810 | 22575 For more details, contact us at:

Email: imagesofenlightenment@gmail.com Whatsapp/ Call: +977 9709047261 Website: enlightenmentthangka.com [enlightenmentthangka, vajradhara, vajradharma, vajrayana buddhism, primordial buddha, tantric teachings, vajrayana deities, buddhist art, enlightenment thangka, sacred thangka art, buddhist wisdom, tibetan buddhis

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Bhutanese Buddhism is a form of Vajrayana (or Tantric) Buddhism, which is the state religion and is deeply integrated into the country's culture, governance, and way of life. It is a unique expression of Mahayana Buddhism with its own local customs, emphasizing 20+ reactions · 3 weeks ago

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What is Vajrayana? : r/Buddhism

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Vajrayana - is a tantric practice that includes a number of esoteric practices that are designed to speed up spiritual progress.

Why is Vajrayana dangerous to practice without a guru?

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What Is the Essence of Vajrayana Buddhism?

YouTube · Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

Aug 26, 2025

YouTube · Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

8:54

Vajrayana Buddhism teaches that we are all Buddhas by nature but are obscured by impure perceptions. The practice is to take fruition as a path, integrating pure perception into meditation and other practices.

The First Step on the Vajrayana Path (with Guided Meditation)

YouTube · Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

Aug 12, 2025

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16:52

Vajrayana meditation begins with appreciation and gratitude, recognizing our innate love, compassion, and wisdom.

Vajrayana for Modern Life with Mingyur Rinpoche

YouTube · Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

Aug 11, 2025

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59:05

Though all of us by nature is free beyond which is wonderful right it's indestructible nothing can harm you by nature of course.

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Vajrayana Buddhism – Thunderbolt or Lightning ...

Original Buddhas

<https://www.originalbuddhas.com> › blog › vajrayana

Vajrayana in Sanskrit means "Thunderbolt or a Diamond Vehicle". It is known as Vajrayana because of the ritual use of the Vajra, a symbol of thunder and ...

Vajrayana | Tantric Rituals, Mantras & Mudras

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Vajrayana, in the history of Buddhism, marks the transition from Mahayana speculative thought to the enactment of Buddhist ideas in individual life.

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vte

Vajrayāna (Sanskrit: वज्रयान, lit. 'Diamond Vehicle or Thunderbolt Vehicle'), otherwise known as Mantrayāna ("Mantra Vehicle"), Guhyamantrayāna ("Secret Mantra Vehicle"), Tantrayāna ("Tantra Vehicle"), Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and Esoteric Buddhism, is a Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition that emphasizes esoteric practices and rituals aimed at rapid spiritual awakening. Emerging between the 5th and 7th centuries CE in medieval India,[1] Vajrayāna Buddhism incorporates a range of techniques, including the use of mantras (sacred sounds), dhāraṇīs (mnemonic codes), mudrās (symbolic hand gestures), mandalās (spiritual diagrams), and the visualization of deities and Buddhas. These practices are designed to transform ordinary experiences into spiritual paths toward enlightenment and liberation, often by engaging with aspects of desire and aversion in a ritualized context.

A distinctive feature of Vajrayāna Buddhism is its emphasis on esoteric transmission, where teachings are passed directly from teacher (guru or vajrācārya) to student through initiation ceremonies.[2] Tradition asserts that these teachings have been passed down through an unbroken lineage going back to the historical Buddha (c. the 5th century BCE), sometimes via other Buddhas or bodhisattvas (e.g., Vajrapani).[3]

This lineage-based transmission ensures the preservation of the purity and effectiveness of the teachings. Practitioners often engage in deity yoga, a meditative practice where one visualizes oneself as a deity embodying enlightened qualities to transform one's perception of reality. The tradition also acknowledges the role of feminine energy, venerating female Buddhas and ḍākiṇīs (spiritual beings), and sometimes incorporates practices that challenge conventional norms to transcend dualistic thinking.

Vajrayāna has given rise to various sub-traditions across Asia. In Tibet, it evolved into Tibetan Buddhism, which became the dominant spiritual tradition, integrating local beliefs and practices. In Japan, it influenced Shingon Buddhism, established by Kūkai, emphasizing the use of mantras and rituals. Chinese Esoteric Buddhism also emerged, blending Vajrayāna practices with existing Chinese Buddhist traditions, however this is no longer a separate sect and has mostly mixed in with normal exoteric Buddhism. Each of these traditions adapted Vajrayāna principles to its cultural context while maintaining core esoteric practices aimed at achieving enlightenment.

Central to Vajrayāna symbolism is the vajra, a ritual implement representing indestructibility and irresistible force, embodying the union of transcendental wisdom and compassion.[4] Practitioners often use the vajra in conjunction with a bell during rituals, symbolizing the integration of male and female principles. The tradition also employs rich visual imagery, including mudrās, complex mandalās, and depictions of wrathful deities that serve as meditation aids to help practitioners internalize spiritual concepts and confront inner obstacles on the path to enlightenment.

Terminology

A vajra and bell (ghanta), which are classic ritual symbols of Vajrayāna Buddhism. In medieval India, the initial terms that were used to refer to the tantric Buddhist tradition were Mantranāya ("Path of Mantras") and Mantrayāna ("Mantra Vehicle").[5] Later, other terms were adopted, like Vajrayāna ("Diamond Vehicle" or "Thunderbolt Vehicle").

In Tibetan Buddhism practiced in the Himalayan regions of India, Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan, Buddhist Tantra is most often termed Vajrayāna (Tib. དྷེ་ཐཱ་ག་པ་, dorje tekpa, Wyl. rdo rje theg pa) and Secret mantra (Skt. Guhyamantra, Tib. གསང་སྐད་གསུང་, sang ngak, Wyl. gsang sngags). The vajra is a mythical weapon associated with Indra that was said to be indestructible and unbreakable (like a diamond)[4] and extremely powerful (like a thunder). Thus, the term is variously translated as Diamond Vehicle, Thunderbolt Vehicle, Indestructible Vehicle, and so on.

The vajra, or diamond, is an adamantine symbol. A diamond has two qualities: it has the power to shatter all ordinary stones, and conversely, no stone can break a diamond. The actual vajra is the mind that has the realization of the ultimate truth inseparably merged with a special kind of tantric bliss. [...] That is why the vajra, or diamond, is the symbol of

the tantric path and its result: the wisdom of nondual emptiness and bliss.[4]

In Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, it is generally known by terms such as Zhēnyán (Chinese: 真言, literally "true word", referring to mantra), Tángmì or Hānmì (唐密 - 漢密, "Tang Esotericism" or "Han Esotericism"), Mìzōng (密宗, "Esoteric Sect"), or Mìjiào (Chinese: 密教; Esoteric Teaching). The Chinese term mì 密 ("secret, esoteric") is a translation of the Sanskrit term Guhya ("secret, hidden, profound, abstruse").[6]

In Japan, Buddhist esotericism is known as Mikkyō (密教, secret teachings) or by the term Shingon (a Japanese rendering of Zhēnyán), which also refers to a specific school of Shingon-shū (真言宗).

The term "Esoteric Buddhism" is first used by Western occultist writers, such as Helena Blavatsky and Alfred Percy Sinnett, to describe theosophical doctrines passed down from "supposedly initiated Buddhist masters." [7]

Origins icon

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According to David B. Gray, Vajrayana originated from pre-existing Tantric traditions, also known as 'Tantrism', which emerged within Hinduism during the first millennium CE. These early Hindu tantric practices had a profound influence on South Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, leading to the development of distinct Buddhist tantric traditions, which arose in the 7th century CE, rapidly spread across Southeast, East, and Central Asia, giving rise to distinct traditions in East Asia and Tibet.[8]

History

Mahasiddhas, Palpung monastery. Note the figure of the great adept Putalipa at center, seated in a cave and gazing at an image of the meditational deity Samvara and the figure at the bottom left holding a skull-staff (khaṭvāṅga) and a flaying knife (kartika).

Mahasiddhas and the tantric movement

Tantric Buddhism is associated with groups of wandering yogis called mahasiddhas in medieval India.[9] According to Robert Thurman, these tantric figures thrived during the latter half of the first millennium CE.[3] According to John Myrdhin Reynolds, the mahasiddhas date to the medieval period in North India and used methods radically different from those used in Buddhist monasteries, including practicing on charnel grounds.[10]

Since Tantra focuses on the transformation of poisons into wisdom, the yogic circles came together in tantric feasts, often in sacred sites (pitha) and places (ksetra), which

included dancing, singing, consort practices, and the ingestion of taboo substances like alcohol, urine, and meat.[11] At least two of the mahasiddhas cited in the Buddhist literature are comparable with the Shaiva Nath saints (Gorakshanath and Matsyendranath) who practiced Hatha Yoga.

According to Schumann, a movement called Sahaja-siddhi developed in the 8th century in Bengal.[12] It was dominated by long-haired, wandering mahasiddhas who openly challenged and ridiculed the Buddhist establishment.[13] The mahasiddhas pursued siddhis, magical powers such as flight and extrasensory perception as well as spiritual liberation.[14][15]

Tantras

Main article: Tantras (Buddhism)

Vajra Realm Mandala, based on the tantric Vajrasekhara Sutra, and symbolizing the final realization of Vairocana Buddha in Shingon

Naked tantrikas dancing and eating from skull cups (kapalas), closeup of a Chakrasamvara mandala

Mahāyāna sutras contain "proto-tantric" material, such as the Gandavyuha and the Dasabhumika, which might have served as a central source of visual imagery for Tantric texts.[16] Later Mahāyāna texts like the Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra (c. 4th–5th century CE) expound the use of mantras such as Om mani padme hum, associated with vastly powerful beings like Avalokiteshvara. The Heart Sutra also includes a mantra.

Vajrayāna Buddhists developed a large corpus of texts, the Buddhist Tantras, some of which can be traced to at least the 7th century CE but might be older. The dating of the tantras is "a difficult, indeed an impossible task", according to David Snellgrove.[17]

Some of the earliest of these texts, Kriya tantras such as the Mañjuśrī-mūla-kalpa (c. 6th century), teach the use of mantras and dharanis for mostly worldly ends, including curing illness, controlling the weather and generating wealth.[18] The Tattvasaṃgraha Tantra (Compendium of Principles), classed as a "Yoga tantra", is one of the first Buddhist tantras that focuses on liberation as opposed to worldly goals. In another early tantra, the Vajrasekhara (Vajra Peak), the influential schema of the five Buddha families is developed.[19] Other early tantras include the Mahāvairocana Abhisambodhi and the Guhyasamāja (Gathering of Secrets).[20]

The Guhyasamāja is a Mahayoga class of Tantra, which features forms of ritual practice considered "left-hand" (vamachara), such as use of taboo substances like alcohol, consort practices, and charnel ground practices that evoke wrathful deities.[21] Ryujun Tajima divides the tantras into those that were "a development of Mahāyānist thought" and those "formed in a rather popular mould toward the end of the eighth century and declining into the esoterism of the left".[22] This "left esoterism" mainly refers to the Yogini tantras and later works associated with wandering yogis. This practice survives in

Tibetan Buddhism, but it is rare for this to be done with an actual person. It is more common for a yogi or yogini to use an imagined consort (a buddhist tantric deity, i.e. a yidam).[23]

Later tantras such as the Hevajra Tantra and the Chakrasamvara are classed as "Yogini tantras" and represent the final form of development of Indian Buddhist tantras in the ninth and tenth centuries.[18] The Kalachakra tantra developed in the 10th century.[24] It is farthest removed from the earlier Buddhist traditions, and incorporates concepts of messianism and astrology not present elsewhere in Buddhist literature.[13]

According to Ronald M. Davidson, the rise of Tantric Buddhism was a response to the feudal structure of Indian society in the early medieval period (ca. 500–1200 CE), which saw kings divinized as manifestations of gods. Likewise, tantric yogis reconfigured their practice through the metaphor of being consecrated (abhiśeka) as the overlord (rājādhirāja) of a mandala palace of divine vassals, an imperial metaphor symbolizing kingly fortresses and their political power.[25]

Relationship to Shaivism

Further information: Kashmir Shaivism

Vajrayana adopted deities such as Bhairava, known as Yamantaka in Tibetan Buddhism.

The central deity of the Cakrasamvara Tantra, which, according to scholars like David B. Gray and Alexis Sanderson, appropriated numerous elements from nondual Shaiva Tantra

The question of the origins of early Vajrayāna has been taken up by various scholars. David Seyfort Ruegg has suggested that Buddhist tantra employed various elements of a "pan-Indian religious substrate" that is not specifically Buddhist, Shaiva or Vaishnava. [26]

According to Alexis Sanderson, various classes of Vajrayāna literature developed as a result of royal courts sponsoring both Buddhism and Shaivism.[27] The relationship between the two systems can be seen in texts like the Mañjusrimulakalpa, which later came to be classified under Kriya tantra, and states that mantras taught in the Shaiva, Garuda, and Vaishnava tantras will be effective if applied by Buddhists since they were all taught originally by Manjushri.[28]

Sanderson notes that the Vajrayāna Yogini tantras draw extensively from the material also present in Shaiva Bhairava tantras classified as Vidyapitha. Sanderson's comparison of them shows similarity in "ritual procedures, style of observance, deities, mantras, mandalas, ritual dress, Kapalika accouterments like skull bowls, specialized terminology, secret gestures, and secret jargons. There is even direct borrowing of passages from Shaiva texts." [29] Sanderson gives numerous examples, such as the Guhyasiddhi of Padmavajra, a work associated with the Guhyasamaja tradition, which prescribes acting as a Shaiva guru and initiating members into Saiva Siddhanta

scriptures and mandalas.[30] Sanderson says that the Samvara tantra texts adopted the pitha list from the Shaiva text Tantrasadbhāva, introducing a copying error where a deity was mistaken for a place.[31]

Davidson argues that Sanderson's arguments for direct influence from Shaiva Vidyapitha texts are problematic because "the chronology of the Vidyapitha tantras is by no means so well established"[32] and "the available evidence suggests that received Saiva tantras come into evidence sometime in the ninth to tenth centuries with their affirmation by scholars like Abhinavagupta (c. 1000 c.e.)"[33] Davidson also notes that the list of pithas or sacred places is "certainly not particularly Buddhist, nor are they uniquely Kapalika venues, despite their presence in lists employed by both traditions." [34] He adds that, like the Buddhists, the Shaiva tradition was involved in the appropriation of Hindu and non-Hindu deities, texts, and traditions, an example being "village or tribal divinities like Tumburu".[35]

Davidson adds that Buddhists and Kapalikas as well as other ascetics (possibly Pasupatas) mingled and discussed their paths at various pilgrimage places and that there were conversions between the different groups. Thus he concludes:

The Buddhist-Kapalika connection is more complex than a simple process of religious imitation and textual appropriation. There can be no question that the Buddhist tantras were heavily influenced by Kapalika and other Saiva movements, but the influence was apparently mutual. Perhaps a more nuanced model would be that the various lines of transmission were locally flourishing and that in some areas they interacted, while in others they maintained concerted hostility. Thus the influence was both sustained and reciprocal, even in those places where Buddhist and Kapalika siddhas were in extreme antagonism.[36]

Davidson also argues for the influence of non-Brahmanical and outcaste tribal religions and their feminine deities (such as Parnasabari and Janguli).[37]

Traditional legends

According to several Buddhist tantras as well as traditional Tibetan Buddhist sources, the Vajrayana tantras were taught by the Buddha Shakyamuni, but only to some individuals. There are several stories and versions of how the tantras were disseminated. The Jñāna Tilaka Tantra, for example, has the Buddha say that the tantras will be explained by the bodhisattva Vajrapani. One of the most famous legends is that of king Indrabhūti (also known as King Ja) of Oddiyana (a figure related to Vajrapani, in some cases said to be an emanation of him).[38]

Other accounts attribute the revelation of Buddhist tantras to Padmasambhava, saying that he was an emanation of Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara and that the Buddha predicted his arrival. Some accounts also maintain Padmasambhava is a direct reincarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni.[39]

Philosophical background

Nalanda Mahavihara, a major center for the study of Vajrayana philosophy during the Pala era.

According to Alex Wayman, the philosophical view of Vajrayana is based on Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, mainly the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools.[40] The major difference seen by Vajrayana thinkers is the superiority of Tantric methods, which provide a faster vehicle to liberation and contain many more skillful means (upaya).

The importance of the theory of emptiness is central to the Tantric Buddhist view and practice. The Buddhist emptiness view sees the world as fluid, without an ontological foundation or inherent existence, but ultimately a fabric of constructions. Because of this, tantric practice such as self-visualization as the deity is seen as no less real than everyday reality, but a process of transforming reality itself, including the practitioner's identity as the deity. Stephan Beyer notes, "In a universe where all events dissolve ontologically into Emptiness, the touching of Emptiness in the ritual is the re-creation of the world in actuality".[41]

The doctrine of Buddha-nature, as outlined in the Ratnagotravibhāga of Asanga, was also an important theory that became the basis for Tantric views.[42] As explained by the Tantric commentator Lilavajra, this "intrinsic secret [behind] diverse manifestation" is Tantra's utmost secret and aim. According to Wayman, this "Buddha embryo" (tathāgatagarbha) is a "non-dual, self-originated Wisdom (jnana), an effortless fount of good qualities" that resides in the mindstream but is "obscured by discursive thought".[43] This doctrine is often associated with the idea of inherent or natural luminosity (Skt: prakṛti-prabhāsvara-citta, T. 'od gsal gyi sems) or purity of the mind (prakṛti-parisuddha).

Another fundamental theory of Tantric practice is that of transformation. In Vajrayāna, negative mental factors such as desire, hatred, greed, and pride are used as part of the path. As French Indologist Madeleine Biardeau notes, the tantric doctrine is "an attempt to place kama, desire, in every meaning of the word, in the service of liberation." [44] This view is outlined in the following passage from the Hevajra tantra:

Those things by which evil men are bound, others turn into means and gain thereby release from the bonds of existence. By passion the world is bound, by passion too it is released, but by heretical Buddhists this practice of reversals is not known.[45]

The Hevajra further states that "one knowing the nature of poison may dispel poison with poison." [44] As Snellgrove notes, this idea is already present in Asanga's Mahayana-sutra-alamkara-karika and therefore it is possible that he was aware of Tantric techniques, including sexual yoga.[46]

According to Buddhist Tantra, there is no strict separation of the profane or samsara and the sacred or nirvana; rather, they exist in a continuum. Everyone is seen as containing the seed of enlightenment, which is covered over by defilements. Douglas Duckworth

notes that Vajrayana sees Buddhahood not as something outside or an event in the future, but as immanently present.[47]

Indian Tantric Buddhist philosophers such as Buddhaguhya, Vimalamitra, Ratnākaraśānti, and Abhayakaragupta continued the tradition of Buddhist philosophy and adapted it to their commentaries on the major Tantras. Abhayakaragupta's Vajravalī is a key source in the theory and practice of tantric rituals. After monks such as Vajrabodhi and Śubhakarasiṃha brought Tantra to Tang China (716 to 720), tantric philosophy continued to be developed in Chinese and Japanese by thinkers such as Yi Xing and Kūkai.

Likewise in Tibet, Sakya Pandita (1182–28 – 1251), as well as later thinkers like Longchenpa (1308–1364) expanded on these philosophies in their tantric commentaries and treatises. The status of the tantric view continued to be debated in medieval Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo (1012–1088) held that the views of sutra such as Madhyamaka were inferior to that of tantra, which was based on basic purity of ultimate reality.[48] Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), on the other hand, held that there is no difference between Vajrayāna and other forms of Mahayana in terms of prajnaparamita (perfection of insight) itself, only that Vajrayāna works faster.[49]

Place within Buddhist tradition

Tangut Auspicious Tantra of All-Reaching Union

Various classifications distinguish Vajrayāna from other Buddhist traditions. Vajrayāna can be seen as a third yana, next to Śrāvakayāna and Mahayana.[13] Vajrayāna can be distinguished from Sutrayana. Sutrayana is the method of perfecting good qualities, where Vajrayāna is the method of taking the intended outcome of Buddhahood as the path. Vajrayāna can also be distinguished from the paramitayana. According to this schema, Indian Mahayana revealed two vehicles (yana) or methods for attaining enlightenment: the method of the perfections (Paramitayana) and the method of mantra (Mantrayana).[50]

The Paramitayana consists of the six or ten paramitas, of which the scriptures say that it takes three incalculable aeons to lead one to Buddhahood. The tantra literature, on the other hand, says that Mantrayana leads one to Buddhahood in a single lifetime.[50]

According to the literature, the mantra is an easy path without the difficulties of Paramitayana.[50] Mantrayana is sometimes portrayed as a method for those of inferior abilities,[50] but the practitioner of mantra must still adhere to the Bodhisattva vow.[50]

Characteristics

Manjushri, the bodhisattva associated with prajñā

Goal

The goal of spiritual practice in the Mahayana and Vajrayāna traditions is to become a Sammāsambuddha (fully awakened Buddha); those on this path are termed

Bodhisattvas. As with the Mahayana, motivation is a vital component of Vajrayāna practice. The Bodhisattva-path is an integral part of Vajrayāna, which teaches that all practices are to be undertaken with the motivation to achieve Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

In the vehicle of Sutra Mahayana, the "path of the cause" is taken whereby a practitioner starts with his or her potential Buddha-nature and nurtures it to produce the fruit of Buddhahood. In Vajrayāna, the "path of the fruit" is taken whereby the practitioner takes his or her innate Buddha-nature as the means of practice. Experiencing ultimate truth is said to be the purpose of all the various tantric techniques practiced in Vajrayana.[51]

Esoteric transmission

Main article: Esoteric transmission

Monks attending the 2003 Kalachakra empowerment in Bodhgaya, India. Some empowerment ceremonies can include large numbers of initiates.

Vajrayāna Buddhism is esoteric in the sense that the transmission of certain teachings occurs only from teacher to student during an empowerment (abhiṣeka), and their practice requires initiation in a ritual space containing the mandala of the deity.[52] Because of their role in giving access to the practices and guiding the student through them, the Vajracharya Lama is considered indispensable in Vajrayāna.[53]

The secrecy of teachings was often protected through the use of allusive, indirect, symbolic, and metaphorical language (twilight language) that required interpretation and guidance from a teacher.[54] The teachings may also be considered "self-secret", meaning that even if they were to be told directly to a person, that person would not necessarily understand the teachings without proper context. In this way, the teachings are "secret" to the minds of those who are not following the path with more than simple curiosity.[55][56]

Esler points out that while secrecy is presented as necessary to prevent the teachings from falling into the hands of unworthy recipients, it also serves to demarcate a kind of religious in-group. He observes that from an anthropological perspective, allowing reference to the secret to "remain close to the social surface" through veiled allusions plays a more important role in some ways than the secret content itself, as it mobilizes the secret as a kind of symbolic capital.[57]

Affirmation of the feminine, antinomian and taboo

Tibetan Chakrasamvara statue in Yab-Yum union with his consort Vajravārāhī

Some Vajrayāna rituals traditionally included the use of certain taboo substances, such as blood, semen, alcohol, and urine, as ritual offerings and sacraments, though some of these are often replaced with less taboo substances such as yogurt. Tantric feasts and initiations sometimes employed substances like human flesh, as noted by Kahha's Yogaratnamala.[58]

The use of these substances is related to the non-dual (advaya) nature of a Buddha's wisdom (buddhajñāna). Since the ultimate state is in some sense non-dual, a practitioner can approach that state by "transcending attachment to dual categories such as pure and impure, permitted and forbidden". As the Guhyasamāja Tantra states, "the wise man who does not discriminate achieves Buddhahood".[58]

Vajrayāna rituals also include sexual yoga, union with a physical consort as part of advanced practices. Some tantras go further: the Hevajra tantra states, "You should kill living beings, speak lying words, take what is not given, consort with the women of others".[58] While some of these statements were taken literally as part of ritual practice, others, such as killing, were interpreted metaphorically. In the Hevajra, "killing" is defined as developing concentration by killing the life-breath of discursive thoughts.[59] Likewise, while actual sexual union with a physical consort is practiced, it is also common to use a visualized consort.[citation needed]

Wayman points out that the symbolic meaning of tantric sexuality is ultimately rooted in bodhicitta and the bodhisattva's quest for enlightenment is likened to a lover seeking union with the mind of the Buddha.[60] Judith Simmer-Brown notes the importance of the psycho-physical experiences arising in sexual yoga, termed "great bliss" (mahasukha): "Bliss melts the conceptual mind, heightens sensory awareness, and opens the practitioner to the naked experience of the nature of mind."[61] This tantric experience is not the same as ordinary self-gratifying sexual passion since it relies on tantric meditative methods using the illusory body and visualizations as well as the motivation for enlightenment.[62] The Hevajra tantra says:

This practice [of sexual union with a consort] is not taught for the sake of enjoyment, but for the examination of one's own thought, whether the mind is steady or waving.[63]

Feminine deities and forces are a major element of Vajrayāna. In the Yogini tantras in particular, women and female yoginis are given high status as the embodiment of female deities such as the wild and nude Vajrayogini.[64] The Candamaharosana Tantra (viii:29–30) states:

Women are heaven, women are the teaching (dharma)
Women indeed are the highest austerity (tapas)
Women are the Buddha, women are the Sangha
Women are the Perfection of Wisdom.[64]

In India, there is evidence that women participated in tantric practice alongside men and were also teachers, adepts, and authors of tantric texts.[65]

Vows and behaviour

Main article: Samaya

Practitioners of Vajrayāna must abide by various tantric vows or pledges called samaya.

These are extensions of the rules of the Prātimokṣa and Bodhisattva vows for the lower levels of tantra, and are taken during initiations into the empowerment for a particular Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra. The special tantric vows vary depending on the specific mandala practice for which the initiation is received and on the level of initiation. Ngagpas of the Nyingma school keep a special non-celibate ordination.

A tantric guru, or teacher, is expected to keep his or her samaya vows in the same way as his students. Proper conduct is considered especially necessary for a qualified Vajrayana guru. For example, the Ornament for the Essence of Manjushrikirti states:

Distance yourself from Vajra Masters who are not keeping the three vows
who keep on with a root downfall, who are miserly with the Dharma,
and who engage in actions that should be forsaken.
Those who worship them go to hell and so on as a result.[66]

Tantra techniques

Mani stones, stones inscribed with the "om mani padme hum" mantra

A Japanese Handscroll depicting various mudras, 11th–12th century

See also: Tibetan tantric practice

While all Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions include all the traditional practices used in Mahayana Buddhism, such as developing bodhicitta, practicing the paramitas, and meditations, they also make use of unique tantric methods and Dzogchen meditation, which are seen as more advanced. These include mantras, mandalas, mudras, deity yoga, other visualization-based meditations, illusory body yogas like tummo, and rituals like the goma fire ritual. Vajrayana teaches that these techniques provide a faster path to Buddhahood.[67]

A central feature of tantric practice is the use of mantras and seed syllables (bijas). Mantras are words, phrases, or a collection of syllables used for various meditative, magical, and ritual ends. Mantras are usually associated with specific deities or Buddhas, and are seen as their manifestations in sonic form. They are traditionally believed to have spiritual power, which can lead to enlightenment as well as supramundane abilities (siddhis).[68]

According to Indologist Alex Wayman, Buddhist esotericism centers on what is known as "the three mysteries" or "secrets": the tantric adept affiliates his body, speech, and mind with the body, speech, and mind of a Buddha through mudra, mantras, and samadhi, respectively.[69] Padmavajra (c. 7th century) explains in his Tantrarthavatara Commentary, the secret Body, Speech, and Mind of the Buddhas are:[70]

Secret of Body: Whatever form is necessary to tame the living beings.

Secret of Speech: Speech exactly appropriate to the lineage of the creature, as in the language of the yaksas, etc.

Secret of Mind: Knowing all things as they really are.

These elements are brought together in the practice of tantric deity yoga, which involves visualizing the deity's body and mandala, reciting the deity's mantra, and gaining insight into the nature of things based on this contemplation. Advanced tantric practices such as deity yoga are taught in the context of an initiation ceremony by tantric gurus or vajracharyas (vajra-masters) to the tantric initiate, who also takes on formal commitments or vows (samaya).[68] In Tibetan Buddhism, advanced practices like deity yoga are usually preceded by or coupled with "preliminary practices" called ngondro, consisting of five to seven accumulation practices and includes prostrations and recitations of the 100 syllable mantra.[71]

Vajrayana is a system of tantric lineages, and thus only those who receive an empowerment or initiation (abhiseka) may practice the more advanced esoteric methods. In tantric deity yoga, mantras, or bijas are used during the ritual evocation of deities that are said to arise out of the uttered and visualized mantric syllables. After the deity's image and mandala has been established, heart mantras are visualized as part of the contemplation in different points of the deity's body.[72]

Most Tantric Buddhists believe nirvana is achievable in a single lifetime with "vigorous study and meditation".[73]

Deity yoga

Main article: Deity yoga

An 18th century Mongolian miniature which depicts a monk generating a tantric visualization

A Japanese depiction of the Amida Triad in Seed Syllable form (Siddham Script). Visualizing deities in the form of seed syllables is a common Vajrayana meditation. In Shingon, one of the most common practices is Ajikan (阿字觀), meditating on the syllable A.

The fundamental practice of Buddhist Tantra is "deity yoga" (devatayoga), meditation on a chosen deity or "cherished divinity" (Skt. Iṣṭa-devatā, Tib. yidam), which involves the recitation of mantras and prayers and visualization of the deity, the associated mandala of the deity's Buddha field, along with consorts and attendant Buddhas and bodhisattvas.[74] According to the Tibetan scholar Tsongkhapa, deity yoga separates Tantra from Sutra practice.[75]

In the Unsurpassed Yoga Tantras, the most widespread tantric form in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, this method is divided into two stages, generation (utpatti-krama) and completion (nispanna-krama). In the generation stage, one dissolves one's reality into emptiness and meditates on the deity-mandala, resulting in identification with this divine reality. During deity visualization, the deity is to be imagined as not solid or tangible, as "empty yet apparent", with the character of a mirage or a rainbow.[76]

This visualization is to be combined with "divine pride", which is "the thought that one is oneself the deity being visualized." [77] Divine pride is different from common pride because it is based on compassion for others and an understanding of emptiness. [78] The divine image along with the illusory body is then dissolved into luminous emptiness. This dissolution into emptiness is then followed by the visualization of the deity and the yogi's re-emergence as the deity. [77] This practice is repeated over a number of daily sessions. The practitioner proceeds to the completion state after completing a requisite number of mantra repetitions, either defined in the text or given by the empowering lama. [79]

A Tibetan depiction of the perfection stage practices of tummo (Skt. candali, inner heat) and phowa (transference of consciousness)

The Tibetologist David Germano outlines two main types of completion practice: a formless and image-less contemplation on the ultimate empty nature of the mind and various yogas that make use of the illusory body to produce energetic sensations of bliss and warmth. [80] The illusory body yogas systems like the Six Dharmas of Naropa and the Six Yogas of Kalachakra make use of energetic schemas of human psycho-physiology composed of "energy channels" (Skt. nadi, Tib. rtsa), "winds" or currents (Skt. vayu, Tib. rlung), "drops" or charged particles (Skt. bindu, Tib. thig le), and chakras ("wheels"). These subtle energies are seen as "mounts" for consciousness, the physical component of awareness. They are engaged by various means such as pranayama (breath control) to produce blissful experiences that are then applied to the realization of ultimate reality. [81]

Other methods associated with the completion stage in Tibetan Buddhism include dream yoga (which relies on lucid dreaming), practices associated with the bardo (the interim state between death and rebirth), transference of consciousness (phowa), and Chöd, in which the yogi ceremonially offers their body to be eaten by tantric deities in a ritual feast.

Other practices

A Newari Buddhist mandala used for Guru Puja, Nepal, 19th century, gilt copper inlaid with semiprecious stones

Video of a Shingon Goma Fire Ritual at Yakuōin Yūkiji, Mount Takao

Another form of Vajrayana practice are certain meditative techniques associated with Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, often termed "formless practices" or the path of self-liberation. These techniques do not rely on deity visualization per se but on direct pointing-out instruction from a master, and are often seen as the most advanced and direct methods. [82]

Another distinctive feature of Tantric Buddhism is its unique and often elaborate rituals. They include pujas (worship rituals), prayer festivals, protection rituals, death rituals, tantric feasts (ganachakra), tantric initiations (abhiseka) and the goma fire ritual

(common in East Asian Esotericism).

Duration: 1 minute and 11 seconds.1:11

A video of the Cham dance, a traditional practice in some sects of Tibetan Buddhism. An important element in some of these rituals (particularly initiations and tantric feasts) seems to have been the practice of ritual sex or sexual yoga (karmamudra, "desire seal", also called "consort observance", vidyavrata, and euphemistically as "puja"), as well as the sacramental ingestion of "power substances" such as the mingled sexual fluids and uterine blood (often performed by licking these substances off the vulva, a practice termed yonipuja).[83]

The practice of ingestion of sexual fluids is mentioned by numerous tantric commentators, sometimes euphemistically referring to the penis as the "vajra" and the vagina as the "lotus". The Cakrasamvara Tantra commentator Kambala, writing about this practice, states:

The seats are well-known on earth to be spots within the lotus mandala; by abiding within it there is great bliss, the royal nature of nondual joy. Therefore the lotus seat is supreme: filled with a mixture of semen and uterine blood, one should especially kiss it, and lolling with the tongue take it up. Unite the vajra and lotus, with the rapture of drinking [this] liquor.[84]

According to David Gray, these sexual practices probably originated in a non-monastic context and were later adopted by monastic establishments (such as Nalanda and Vikramashila). He notes that the anxiety of figures like Atisa about these practices, and the stories of Virūpa and Maitripa being expelled from their monasteries for performing them, shows that supposedly celibate monastics were undertaking these sexual rites. [85]

Because of its adoption by the monastic tradition, sexual yoga slowly became either done with an imaginary consort visualized by the yogi instead of an actual person, or reserved to a small group of the "highest" or elite practitioners. Likewise, the drinking of sexual fluids was also reinterpreted by later commentators to refer to illusory body anatomy of the perfection stage practices.[86]

Symbols and imagery

Dagchen Rinpoche's hand holds a vajra drawing lines that close the Hevajra Mandala, after the empowerment, Tharlam Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Vajrayāna uses a rich variety of symbols, terms, and images that have multiple meanings according to a complex system of analogical thinking. In Vajrayāna, symbols, and terms are multi-valent, reflecting the microcosm and the macrocosm as in the phrase "As without, so within" (yatha bahyam tatha 'dhyatmam iti) from Abhayakaragupta's Nispannayogavali.[87]

The vajra

Bronze vajras and bell from Itsukushima, Japan

The Sanskrit term "vajra" denoted a thunderbolt like a legendary weapon and divine attribute that was made from an adamantite, or an indestructible substance which could, therefore, pierce and penetrate any obstacle or obfuscation. It is the weapon of choice of Indra, the King of the Devas. As a secondary meaning, "vajra" symbolizes the ultimate nature of things which is described in the tantras as translucent, pure and radiant, but also indestructible and indivisible. It is also symbolic of the power of tantric methods to achieve its goals.[88]

A vajra is also a scepter-like ritual object (Standard Tibetan: རྡོ་རྗེ་ dorje), which has a sphere (and sometimes a gankyil) at its centre, and a variable number of spokes, 3, 5 or 9 at each end (depending on the sadhana), enfolding either end of the rod. The vajra is often traditionally employed in tantric rituals in combination with the bell or ghanta; symbolically, the vajra may represent method as well as great bliss and the bell stands for wisdom, specifically the wisdom realizing emptiness. The union of the two sets of spokes at the center of the wheel is said to symbolize the unity of wisdom (prajña) and compassion (karuna) as well as the sexual union of male and female deities.[89]

Imagery and ritual in deity yoga

Chöd ritual, showing the use of Damaru drum and hand-bell, as well as the Kangling (thighbone trumpet)

Representations of the deity, such as statues (murti), paintings (thangka), or mandala, are often employed as an aid to visualization, in deity yoga. The use of visual aids, particularly microcosmic/macrocosmic diagrams, known as mandalas, is another unique feature of Buddhist Tantra. Mandalas are symbolic depictions of the sacred space of the awakened Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as well as of the inner workings of the human person.[90] The macrocosmic symbolism of the mandala then, also represents the forces of the human body. The explanatory tantra of the Guhyasamaja tantra, the Vajramala, states: "The body becomes a palace, the hallowed basis of all the Buddhas." [91]

Mandalas are also sacred enclosures, sacred architecture that house and contain the uncontainable essence of a central deity or yidam and their retinue. In the book *The World of Tibetan Buddhism*, the Dalai Lama describes mandalas thus: "This is the celestial mansion, the pure residence of the deity." The Five Tathagatas or 'Five Buddhas', along with the figure of the Adi-Buddha, are central to many Vajrayana mandalas as they represent the "five wisdoms", which are the five primary aspects of primordial wisdom or Buddha-nature.[92]

All ritual in Vajrayana practice can be seen as aiding in this process of visualization and

identification. The practitioner can use various hand implements such as a vajra, bell, hand-drum (damaru) or a ritual dagger (phurba), but also ritual hand gestures (mudras) can be made, special chanting techniques can be used, and in elaborate offering rituals or initiations, many more ritual implements and tools are used, each with an elaborate symbolic meaning to create a special environment for practice. Vajrayana has thus become a major inspiration in traditional Tibetan art.

Texts

Three leaves from a manuscript of the Vajrāvalī, a ritual compendium compiled by Abhayakaragupta, abbot of the Vikramashila monastery around 1100 CE

See also: Tantras (Buddhism) and Tibetan Buddhist canon

There is an extended body of texts associated with Buddhist Tantra, including the "tantras" themselves, tantric commentaries and shastras, sadhanas (liturgical texts), ritual manuals (Chinese: 儀軌; Pinyin: Yíguǐ; Rōmaji: Giki), dharanis, poems or songs (dohas), termas and so on. According to Harunaga Isaacson,

Though we do not know precisely at present just how many Indian tantric Buddhist texts survive today in the language in which they were written, their number is certainly over one thousand five hundred; I suspect indeed over two thousand. A large part of this body of texts has also been translated into Tibetan, and a smaller part into Chinese. Aside from these, there are perhaps another two thousand or more works that are known today only from such translations. We can be certain as well that many others are lost to us forever, in whatever form. Of the texts that survive a very small proportion has been published; an almost insignificant percentage has been edited or translated reliably.[93]

Vajrayāna texts exhibit a wide range of literary characteristics—usually a mix of verse and prose, almost always in a Sanskrit that "transgresses frequently against classical norms of grammar and usage," although also occasionally in various Middle Indic dialects or elegant classical Sanskrit.[93]

In Chinese Mantrayana (Zhenyan), and Japanese Shingon, the most influential esoteric texts are the Mahavairocana Tantra and the Vajraśekhara Sūtra.[94][95]

In Tibetan Buddhism, a large number of tantric works are widely studied and different schools focus on the study and practice of different cycles of texts. According to Geoffrey Samuel,

the Sakyapa specialize in the Hevajra Tantra, the Nyingmapa specialize in the various so called Old Tantras and terma cycles, and the most important Kagyudpa and Gelugpa tantras are Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara and Kālacakra.[96]

Dunhuang manuscripts

The Dunhuang manuscripts also contain Tibetan Tantric manuscripts. Dalton and

Schaik (2007, revised) provide an excellent online catalogue listing 350 Tibetan Tantric Manuscripts] from Dunhuang in the Stein Collection of the British Library which is currently fully accessible online in discrete digitized manuscripts.[97] With the Wylie transcription of the manuscripts they are to be made discoverable online in the future. [98] These 350 texts are just a small portion of the vast cache of the Dunhuang manuscripts.

Traditions

Map showing the dominant Buddhist tradition throughout Asia. Vajrayana (in the form of Tibetan Buddhism) dominates the Himalayan regions and in the Mongolian regions.

The Nīlakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī engraved on a stele. Temple Fo Ding Shan Chao Sheng in Sanyi Township, Taiwan. Erected in June 2005.

Although there is historical evidence for Vajrayāna Buddhism in Southeast Asia and elsewhere (see History of Vajrayāna above), today Vajrayāna exists primarily in the form of the two major traditions of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (in Tibet and other parts of the PRC, Bhutan, India and also internationally) and Japanese Esoteric Buddhism (mostly in Japan), which is found in the Shingon (literally "True Speech", i.e. mantra) and Tendai schools.

Other traditions like contemporary Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Zen, Korean Buddhism, and Vietnamese Buddhism also make use of esoteric (Chinese: mijiao, Japanese: mikkyo) or mantrayana methods to a lesser extent. In many Asian Mahayana Buddhist traditions, esoteric methods are used as a complement, not as the central practice. This mainly involves the recitation of mantras (like the ten small mantras) and various popular dharanis. However, certain revival movements have attempted to establish new esoteric schools in mainland East Asia such as Mantra School Bright Lineage (in China) and the South Korean Jingak Order.

There was strong connection between the Palas in Bengal, Srivijaya in Nusantara, and the kingdoms in East Asia through the sea route. Medieval monks were a prime factor in the spread of esoteric Buddhism.[99]

A map depicting the spread of Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast and Eastern Eurasia
The distinction between mantrayana traditions is not always rigid. For example, the tantra sections of the Tibetan Buddhist canon of texts sometimes include material not usually thought of as tantric outside the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, such as the widely recited Heart Sutra[100] and even versions of some material found in the Pali Canon.[a]

Chinese Esoteric Buddhism

Main article: Chinese Esoteric Buddhism

The Jing'an Temple in Shanghai, China, which promotes the Chinese Zhenyan

(Mantrayana) tradition.

Esoteric and Tantric teachings followed the same route into northern China as Buddhism itself, arriving via the Silk Road and Southeast Asian Maritime trade routes sometime during the first half of the 7th century, during the Tang dynasty and received sanction from the emperors of the Tang dynasty. During this time, three great masters came from India to China: Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra who translated key texts and founded the Zhenyan (真言, "true word", "mantra") tradition.[101]

Zhenyan was also brought to Japan as Shingon during this period. This tradition focused on tantras like the Mahavairocana tantra, and unlike Tibetan Buddhism, it does not employ the antinomian and radical tantrism of the Anuttarayoga Tantras. The prestige of this tradition eventually influenced other schools of Chinese Buddhism such as Chan and Tiantai to adopt various esoteric practices over time, leading to a merging of teachings between the various schools.[102][103][104] During the Yuan dynasty, the Mongol emperors made Tibetan Buddhism the official religion of China, and Tibetan lamas were given patronage at the court.[105] Imperial support of Tibetan Vajrayana continued into the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The vajrācārya of a Yujia Yankou ritual performing a mudrā while wearing a Five Buddha crown adorned with images of the Five Tathāgatas

Today, esoteric traditions are deeply embedded in mainstream Chinese Buddhism and expressed through various rituals which make use of tantric mantra and dhāraṇī and the veneration of certain tantric deities like Cundi and Acala.[106] One example of esoteric teachings still practiced in many Chinese Buddhist monasteries is the Śūraṅgama Sūtra and the dhāraṇī revealed within it, the Śūraṅgama Mantra, which are especially influential in the Chinese Chan tradition.[107] Another example is the popular tantric Yujia Yankou ritual, where monastics take on the role of a vajrācārya and performs deity yoga through the usage of mantras, mudrās and maṇḍala offerings in order to help facilitate the nourishment and ultimate liberation of all sentient beings.[108] In particular, the usage of mantras, mudrās and maṇḍalas in the ritual correspond directly to the concept of the "Three Mysteries" (Chinese: 三密; pinyin: Sānmì) in tantric Buddhism: the "secrets" of body, speech and mind.[108][109] This ritual is commonly performed during or at the end of regular religious temple events such as repentance rites, Buddha recitation retreats, the dedication of a new monastic complex or gatherings for the transmission of monastic vows. It is also widely performed as a post-mortem rite within Chinese society during funerals and other related occasions such as the Ghost Festival. [108] A related ritual that also involves esoteric practices is the extensive Shuilu Fahui ceremony, which involves setting up maṇḍalas of esoteric deities such as the Ten Wisdom Kings as well as the invocation of those deities to the ritual space via mantras, mudrās and visualization.[110][111]

A recent development is known as the "tantric revival movement" (mijiao fuxing yundong 密教復興運動) which involved the revival of Chinese Esoteric schools by Chinese students of Japanese Shingon.[112] Some important figures of this revival include Wang

Hongyuan 王弘願 (1876–1937), and Guru Wuguang (悟光上師 (1918–2000), both trained in Shingon and went on to spread Shingon teachings in the Chinese speaking world.[113][114] These revivalist lineages exist in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia. Though they draw mainly from Shingon teachings, they have also adopted some Tibetan Buddhist elements.[115]

Another form of esoteric Buddhism in China is the related but unique tradition of Azhaliism, which is practiced among the Bai people of China and venerates Mahakala as a major deity.[116][117]

Japanese esotericism

Portrait of Kobo Daishi (Kukai) holding a vajra and a mala, 14th century, Art Institute of Chicago

Shingon Buddhism

Main article: Shingon Buddhism

The Shingon school is found in Japan and includes practices, known in Japan as Mikkyō ("Esoteric (or Mystery) Teaching"), which are similar in concept to those in Vajrayana Buddhism. The lineage for Shingon Buddhism differs from that of Tibetan Vajrayana, having emerged from India during the 9th–11th centuries in the Pala Dynasty and Central Asia (via China) and is based on earlier versions of the Indian texts than the Tibetan lineage. Shingon shares material with Tibetan Buddhism – such as the esoteric sutras (called Tantras in Tibetan Buddhism) and mandalas – but the actual practices are not related.

The primary texts of Shingon Buddhism are the Mahavairocana Sutra and Vajrasekhara Sutra. The founder of Shingon Buddhism was Kukai, a Japanese monk who studied in China in the 9th century during the Tang dynasty and brought back Vajrayana scriptures, techniques and mandalas then popular in China. The school was merged into other schools in China towards the end of the Tang dynasty but was sectarian in Japan. Shingon is one of the few remaining branches of Buddhism in the world that continues to use the siddham script of the Sanskrit language.

Tendai Buddhism

Main article: Tendai

Although the Tendai school in China and Japan does employ some esoteric practices, these rituals came to be considered of equal importance with the exoteric teachings of the Lotus Sutra. By chanting mantras, maintaining mudras, or practicing certain forms of meditation, Tendai maintains that one is able to understand sense experiences as taught by the Buddha, have faith that one is innately an enlightened being, and that one can attain enlightenment within the current lifetime.

Korean milgyo

Esoteric Buddhist practices (known as milgyo, 密教) and texts arrived in Korea during the introduction of Buddhism to the region in 372 CE.[118] Esoteric Buddhism was

supported by the royalty of both Unified Silla (668–935) and Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392).[118] During the Goryeo Dynasty esoteric practices were common within large sects like the Seon school and the Hwaeom school as well as smaller esoteric sects like the Sinin (mudra) and Ch'ongji (Dharani) schools. During the era of the Mongol occupation (1251–1350s), Tibetan Buddhism also existed in Korea, though it never gained a foothold there.[119]

During the Joseon dynasty, Esoteric Buddhist schools were forced to merge with the Seon and Kyo schools, becoming the ritual specialists. With the decline of Buddhism in Korea, Esoteric Buddhism mostly died out, save for a few traces in the rituals of the Jogye Order and Taego Order.[119]

There are now five esoteric Buddhist schools in South Korea: Jingak Order, Jineon Order, Chongji Order, Jisong Order, and Cheonhwa Buddhism.[120] According to Henrik H. Sørensen, the Jineon and Jingak Orders "have absolutely no historical link with the Korean Buddhist tradition per se but are late constructs based in large measures on Japanese Shingon Buddhism." [119]

Vietnamese Buddhist esotericism

Statue of Từ Đạo Hạnh wearing an esoteric Five Tathāgatas Crown in the Thầy Temple near Hanoi.

Vietnamese Buddhist esotericism is known as Mật giáo or Mật Tông and is a common part of Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism (along with Pure Land practice and Thien). [121] Commonly recited esoteric texts include Uṣṇīṣavijayadhāraṇī, the Nīlakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī and the Śūraṅgama mantra. According to Quang Minh Thich "at present, it is still the norm in Vietnamese Buddhist temples, both in Vietnam and abroad, that these mantras, as elements of the Mantrayana, are recited either in their distinctive chanted sessions or in conjunction with other popular Buddhist scriptures. In function, the Vietnamese Tantric practices serve as a complement to the practices of Zen and Pure Land, not as an independent tradition." [121]

The first Vietnamese monk we know of who studied Vajrayana was Master Van Ky (c. 7th century) who received initiation in the kingdom of Srivijaya from a certain Jñānabhadra (Tri Hien) as reported by Yijing.[122] By the 12th century (under the Lý dynasty), esoteric Buddhism was widespread in Vietnam, and was especially favored by the Vô Ngôn Thông school as well as by the Vinitaruci school.[123] One famous esoteric master of this period was Từ Đạo Hạnh.[123] He brought back various texts and practices from Burma. He became famous as a powerful magician.[124] He was fond of the Mahākaraṇika Dhāraṇī.[123] He also spread esoteric teachings throughout Vietnam and liberalized their practice, making them less dependent on reincarnation lineages (similar to Tibetan tulku). [125] Another promoter of esoteric Buddhism during this period was Sùng Phạm (1004-1078) of Pháp Vân pagoda who studied in India for nine years before returning to Vietnam and was the teacher of the influential esoteric master Tri Bat.[123] Pháp Loa (1284-1330), a leader of the Trúc Lâm school, was another very

influential Vietnamese esoteric master. He is known for establishing esoteric abhiseka (initiation) ceremonies as well as Huayan (Hoa Nghiêm) assemblies. He also wrote various texts on esoteric topics.[126]

Chinese Buddhist esotericism also influenced Vietnamese esotericism during the medieval period, especially the Huayan Esotericism of Daoshen's *Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji* (顯密圓通成佛心要集 Collection of Essentials for the Attainment of Buddhahood by Total [Inter-]Penetration of the Esoteric and the Exoteric, T1955).

Some modern teachers and organizations focus specifically on Vietnamese esoteric Buddhism. Thích Viên Đức (1932-1980) was one important modern promoter of Esoteric Buddhism. He is known for translating a collection of Esoteric Buddhist texts, contributing to the dissemination of Esoteric Buddhism in Vietnam. Thích Viên Đức promoted esoteric Buddhist teachings as the fastest path to enlightenment. He established numerous communities in southern Vietnam and was also known as a healer. He also met with Tibetan lamas and Japanese Buddhists.[127] Another modern Vietnamese esoteric organization is Mat Giao Friendship Association who publishes Phước Triệu's *Quintessence of Esoteric Buddhism* (2004). Esoteric practices are also currently associated with the Thầy Temple in Greater Hanoi. Vietnamese esotericism can also be quite syncretic, borrowing from Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism.

Indo-Tibetan Buddhism

Part of a series on

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Dharma Wheel

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Main article: Tibetan Buddhism

Born in the Tantric heartland of Oddiyana (identified as Swat district), Padmasambhava was an important figure in disseminating Buddhism in Tibet

Buddhism was initially established in Tibet in the 8th century when various figures like Padmasambhāva (8th century CE) and Śāntarakṣita (725–788) were invited by King Trisong Detsen, some time before 767. In contrast to its neighbours that adhered to Mahayana, Tibet adopted Vajrayana on full scale following the Samye debate, where Indian Vajrayana scholar Kamalaśīla defeated the Chan Buddhist scholar Moheyan in

an Indian style debate. Tibetan Buddhism reflects the later stages tantric Indian Buddhism of the post-Gupta Early Medieval period (500 to 1200 CE).[128][129]

This tradition practices and studies a set of tantric texts and commentaries associated with the more "left hand" (vamachara) tantras, which are not part of East Asian Esoteric Buddhism. These tantras (sometimes termed 'Anuttarayoga tantras' include many transgressive elements, such as sexual and mortuary symbolism that is not shared by the earlier tantras that are studied in East Asian Buddhism. These texts were translated into Classical Tibetan during the "New translation period" (10th–12th centuries). Tibetan Buddhism also includes numerous native Tibetan developments, such as the tulku system, new sadhana texts, Tibetan scholastic works, Dzogchen literature and Terma literature. There are four major traditions or schools: Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug in addition to minor schools like Jonang and Rimé movement.

In the pre-modern era, Tibetan Buddhism spread outside of Tibet primarily due to the influence of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), founded by Kublai Khan, which ruled China, Mongolia and eastern Siberia. In the modern era it has spread outside of Asia due to the efforts of the Tibetan diaspora (1959 onwards).

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition is today found in Tibet, Bhutan, northern India, Nepal, southwestern and northern China, Mongolia and various constituent republics of Russia that are adjacent to the area, such as Amur Oblast, Buryatia, Zabaykalsky Krai, the Tuva Republic and Khabarovsk Krai. Tibetan Buddhism is also the main religion in Kalmykia. It has also spread to Western countries and there are now international networks of Tibetan Buddhist temples and meditation centers in the Western world from all four schools.

Bengali Buddhism

Main article: Bengali Buddhists

12th century stone statue of Chakrasamvara in sexual union with Vajravarahi from Bengal

Bengal was a thriving centre of Vajrayana under the patronage of the Pala dynasty. Many mahasiddhas hailed from the Eastern zone of the Indian subcontinent, with the Charyapada, a collection of songs composed by these mahasiddhas, containing early references to Vajrayana as well as being an early written record of Eastern Indic languages. Bengali Vajrayana scholar Atiśa played a vital role in revitalizing Buddhism in Tibet following its persecution by the Bon emperor Langdarma and onset of the Era of Fragmentation, leading to the foundation of the Kadam lineage. Another Bengali Vajrayana scholar Abhayakaragupta also had a profound impact on Tibetan Buddhism. However Vajrayana declined by the time the Sena dynasty came to power. Vajrayana was further affected by the Islamic conquest of India & consolidation of Muslim rule in Bengal, with many of its adherents converting to Islam under duress & later Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which lead to creation of new groups like Sahajiyas. Today Buddhism in Bengal is followed only by a small minority of Jumma people who are followers of

Theravāda Buddhism.[130]

Nepalese Newar Buddhism

Main article: Newar Buddhism

A contemporary Newar vajracharya performing rituals at Swayambhunath

Newar Buddhism is practiced by Newars in Nepal. It is the only form of Vajrayana Buddhism in which the scriptures are written in Sanskrit and this tradition has preserved many Vajrayana texts in this language. Its priests do not follow celibacy and are called vajracharya (literally "diamond-thunderbolt carriers").

Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism

Main article: Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism

Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism refers to the traditions of Esoteric Buddhism found in the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra before the rise and dominance of Islam in the region (13–16th centuries). The Buddhist empire of Srivijaya (650 CE–1377 CE) was a major center of Esoteric Buddhist learning which drew Chinese monks such as Yijing and Indian scholars like Atiśa.[131] The temple complex at Borobudur in central Java, built by the Shailendra dynasty also reflects strong Tantric or at least proto-tantric influences, particularly of the cult of Vairocana.[132][133]

Hevajra statue from Khmer empire, dating to the reign of Jayavarman VII

Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism may have also reached the Philippines, possibly establishing the first form of Buddhism in the Philippines. The few Buddhist artifacts that have been found in the islands reflect the iconography of Srivijaya's Vajrayana.[134]

Related traditions

Some traditions are related to Vajrayana, but are not to be seen as "Vajrayana" or "Mantrayana" proper. Vajrayana here referring to the Buddhist tradition based on the tantric literature of North Indian Mahayana, the Buddhist tantras and the works of the Nalanda - Vikramashila masters and the Buddhist mahasiddhas. However, these related traditions may have been influenced by Vajrayana proper and have borrowed practices from Vajrayana schools.

Shugendō

Yamabushi priests at Gose, Nara

Main article: Shugendō

Shugendō was founded in 7th-century Japan by the ascetic En no Gyōja, based on the Queen's Peacocks Sutra. With its origins in the solitary hijiri back in the 7th century, Shugendō evolved as a sort of amalgamation between Esoteric Buddhism, Shinto and several other religious influences including Taoism. Buddhism and Shinto were amalgamated in the shinbutsu shūgō, and Kūkai's syncretic religion held wide sway up until the end of the Edo period, coexisting with Shinto elements within Shugendō[135]

In 1613 during the Edo period, the Tokugawa Shogunate issued a regulation obliging Shugendō temples to belong to either Shingon or Tendai temples. During the Meiji Restoration, when Shinto was declared an independent state religion separate from Buddhism, Shugendō was banned as a superstition not fit for a new, enlightened Japan. Some Shugendō temples converted themselves into various officially approved Shintō denominations. In modern times, Shugendō is practiced mainly by Tendai and Shingon sects, retaining an influence on modern Japanese religion and culture.[136]

Southern Esoteric Buddhism

Main article: Southern Esoteric Buddhism

Abhayagiri vihara was a thriving centre of esoteric Buddhism in Sri Lanka until its suppression by Parakramabahu I.

"Southern Esoteric Buddhism" or Borān kammaṭṭhāna ('ancient practices') is a term for esoteric forms of Buddhism from Southeast Asia, where Theravada Buddhism is dominant. The monks of the Sri Lankan, Abhayagiri vihara once practiced forms of tantra which were popular in the island.[137] Another tradition of this type was Ari Buddhism, which was common in Burma. The Tantric Buddhist 'Yogāvacara' tradition was a major Buddhist tradition in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand well into the modern era.[138]

Southern Esoteric Buddhism is a unique Southeast Asian development based on Theravada Abhidhamma and Pali language sources. As such, it has no direct connection to the Indian "Vajrayana" of the Buddhist tantras, the Indian mahasiddhas and the Nalanda-Vikramashila traditions.

Southern Esoteric Buddhism declined after the rise of Southeast Asian Buddhist modernism. However, esoteric Buddhist practices remain in some contemporary South East Asian traditions, including the Thai Dhammakaya tradition, the Burmese Weizza tradition and in rural Cambodian Buddhism.

Academic study difficulties

Serious Vajrayana academic study in the Western world is in early stages due to the following obstacles:[139]

Although a large number of Tantric scriptures are extant, they have not been formally ordered or systematized.

Due to the esoteric initiatory nature of the tradition, many practitioners will not divulge information or sources of their information.

As with many different subjects, it must be studied in context and with a long history spanning many different cultures.

Ritual, as well as doctrine, need to be investigated.

Buddhist tantric practice is categorized as secret practice; this is to avoid misinformed people from harmfully misusing the practices. A method to keep this secrecy is that

tantric initiation is required from a master before any instructions can be received about the actual practice. During the initiation procedure in the highest class of tantra (such as the Kalachakra), students must take the tantric vows which commit them to such secrecy.[140] "Explaining general tantra theory in a scholarly manner, not sufficient for practice, is likewise not a root downfall. Nevertheless, it weakens the effectiveness of our tantric practice." [141]

Terminology

The terminology associated with Vajrayana Buddhism can be confusing. Most of the terms originated in the Sanskrit language of tantric Indian Buddhism and may have passed through other cultures, notably those of Japan and Tibet, before translation for the modern reader. Further complications arise as seemingly equivalent terms can have subtle variations in use and meaning according to context, the time and place of use. A third problem is that Vajrayana texts employ the tantric tradition of twilight language, a means of instruction that is deliberately coded. These obscure teaching methods relying on symbolism as well as synonym, metaphor and word association add to the difficulties faced by those attempting to understand Vajrayana Buddhism:

In the Vajrayana tradition, now preserved mainly in Tibetan lineages, it has long been recognized that certain important teachings are expressed in a form of secret symbolic language known as *saṃdhyā-bhāṣā*, 'Twilight Language'. *Mudrās* and *mantras*, *maṇḍalas* and *cakras*, those mysterious devices and diagrams that were so much in vogue in the pseudo-Buddhist hippie culture of the 1960s, were all examples of Twilight Language [...][142]

The term Tantric Buddhism was not one originally used by those who practiced it. As scholar Isabelle Onians explains:

"Tantric Buddhism" [...] is not the transcription of a native term, but a rather modern coinage, if not totally occidental. For the equivalent Sanskrit *tāntrika* is found, but not in Buddhist texts. *Tāntrika* is a term denoting someone who follows the teachings of scriptures known as *Tantras*, but only in Saivism, not Buddhism [...] Tantric Buddhism is a name for a phenomenon which calls itself, in Sanskrit, *Mantranaya*, *Vajrayāna*, *Mantrayāna* or *Mantramahāyāna* (and apparently never *Tantrayāna*). Its practitioners are known as *mantrins*, *yogis*, or *sādhakas*. Thus, our use of the anglicised adjective "Tantric" for the Buddhist religion taught in *Tantras* is not native to the tradition, but is a borrowed term which serves its purpose.[143]

See also

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Eastern esotericism
Malaysian Vajrayana
Tukdam
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This article is about the Secret Chiefs in occultism. For the band, see Secret Chiefs 3.

Part of a series on the

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In various occultist movements, Secret Chiefs are said to be transcendent cosmic authorities, a spiritual hierarchy responsible for the operation and moral calibre of the cosmos, or for overseeing the operations of an esoteric organization that manifests outwardly in the form of a magical order or lodge system. Their names and descriptions have varied through time, differing among those who have claimed experience of contact with them. They are variously held to exist on higher planes of being or to be incarnate; if incarnate, they may be described as being gathered at some special location, such as Shambhala, or scattered through the world working anonymously.

History

One early and influential source on these entities is Karl von Eckartshausen, whose *The Cloud upon the Sanctuary*,^[1] published in 1793, explained in some detail their character and motivations.^[2] Several 19th and 20th century occultists claimed to belong to or to have contacted these Secret Chiefs and made these communications known to others: Aleister Crowley (who used the term to refer to members of the upper three grades of his order, A.∴A.∴),^[3] Dion Fortune (who called them the "esoteric order"),^[4] and Max Heindel (who called them the "Elder Brothers").^[5]

Golden Dawn

Main article: Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was founded by persons claiming to be in communication with the Secret Chiefs. One of these Secret Chiefs (or a person in contact with them) was supposedly the (probably fictional) Anna Sprengel, whose name and address were allegedly decoded from the Cipher Manuscripts by William Wynn Westcott.^[6]

In 1892, S. MacGregor Mathers (another founder) claimed that he had contacted these Secret Chiefs independently of Sprengel, and that this confirmed his position as head of the Golden Dawn.^[7] He declared this in a manifesto four years later saying that they were human and living on Earth, yet possessed terrible superhuman powers.^[7] He used this status to found the Second Order within the Golden Dawn,^[8] and to introduce the Adeptus Minor ritual.^[9]

Aleister Crowley

Main article: Aleister Crowley

While in Algeria in 1909, Aleister Crowley, along with Victor Neuburg, recited numerous Enochian Calls or Aires. After the fifteenth Aire, he declared that he had attained the grade of Magister Templi (Master of the Temple), which meant that he was now on the level of these Secret Chiefs, although this declaration caused many occultists to stop taking him seriously if they had not done so already.[10][11] He also described this attainment as a possible and in fact a necessary step for all who truly followed his path.
[a]

See also

Ascended master

Church invisible

Communion of the saints

Great White Brotherhood

Illuminati

Twenty-Four Elders

Tzadikim Nistarim ("36 righteous ones")

Wali ("master", "authority", "custodian", or "protector")

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Notes

Crowley (1935), in his *One Star in Sight*, says the order in question "is composed of those who have crossed the Abyss...the two crises — the Angel and the Abyss — are necessary features in every career."

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In esoteric cosmology, a plane is conceived as a subtle state, level, or region of reality, each plane corresponding to some type, kind, or category of being.

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Hindu Tantra is a complex spiritual path focused on using rituals, mantras, meditation, and yogic practices to awaken divine energy (Shakti) within, aiming for spiritual

liberation (mukti) and worldly enjoyment (bhukti) by integrating the material and spiritual realms, often centered on deities like Shiva and the Great Goddess. It's a system for spiritual transformation that emphasizes direct experience and uses tools like sacred sounds (mantras) and diagrams (yantras) to achieve union with the divine.

Core Concepts

Shakti: The dynamic, creative, divine feminine energy, seen as the source of the universe, often worshipped as the supreme Goddess (Devi).

Shiva: The static, unmanifested aspect of reality, often seen as the counterpart to Shakti; Tantra seeks to unite Shiva (consciousness) and Shakti (energy).

Non-Dualism (Advaita): The belief that Shiva and Shakti are ultimately one, and the goal is to realize this oneness within oneself.

Key Practices (Tantric Methods)

Mantra: Chanting sacred syllables or phrases for spiritual power.

Yantra/Mandala: Using geometric diagrams as visual aids for meditation and deity invocation.

Yoga & Pranayama: Yogic postures and breath control to channel energy.

Ritual (Puja): Ceremonial worship of deities, often with specific, esoteric rites.

Kundalini Yoga: Awakening the dormant spiritual energy (Kundalini) at the base of the spine.

Goals

Enlightenment/Liberation (Mukti): Achieving oneness with the divine.

Enjoyment (Bhukti): Experiencing the world fully and skillfully, not renouncing it.

Transformation: Using the body and mind as tools for spiritual growth, not seeing them as obstacles.

Tantra vs. Mainstream Hinduism

Tantra offers a faster, more direct path than traditional Vedic methods, making it suitable for the current age (Kali Yuga).

It often integrates aspects of daily life and the physical body into the spiritual path, viewing them as potential vehicles for awakening.

Common Misconceptions

Tantra is often misunderstood as solely focusing on sexual practices (Maithuna), but this is just one ritualistic component within a much broader system of spiritual disciplines.

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Tantra deals with ritual and spiritual practices to attain the grace of that Shakti, with the

aim at achieving liberation from darkness of ignorance.
Hindu tantric literature

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Tantric art. Clockwise from upper left: Sri Yantra, Kalachakra Mandala, Shaiva Nath chakra, and Vajrayogini.

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Tantra (/ˈtʌnrə/; Sanskrit: तन्त्र, lit. 'expansion-device, salvation-spreader; loom, weave, warp') is an esoteric yogic tradition that developed on the Indian subcontinent beginning in the middle of the 1st millennium CE, initially within Shaivism and Shaktism, and subsequently in Mahayana Buddhism and Vaishnavism.[1] The Tantras focus on sādhana, encompassing dīkṣā, rituals, and yoga, within a ritual framework that includes bodily purification, divine self-creation through mantra, dhyāna, pūjā, mudrā, mantra recitation, and the use of yantras or maṇḍalas, despite variations in deities and mantras. They present complex cosmologies, viewing the body as divine and typically reflecting the union of Shiva and Shakti as the path to liberation. Tantric goals include siddhi (supernatural accomplishment), bhoga (worldly enjoyment), and Kuṇḍalinī's ascent, while also addressing states of possession (āveśa) and exorcism.

The term tantra, in the Indian traditions, also means any systematic broadly applicable "text, theory, system, method, instrument, technique or practice".[2][3] A key feature of these traditions is the use of mantras, and thus they are commonly referred to as Mantramārga ("Path of Mantra") in Hinduism or Mantrayāna ("Mantra Vehicle") and Guhyamantra ("Secret Mantra") in Buddhism.[4][5]

In Buddhism, the Vajrayana traditions are known for tantric ideas and practices, which are based on Indian Buddhist Tantras.[6] They include Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, Japanese Shingon Buddhism and Nepalese Newar Buddhism.

Although Southern Esoteric Buddhism does not directly reference the tantras, its practices and ideas parallel them. In Buddhism, tantra has influenced the art and iconography of Tibetan and East Asian Buddhism, as well as historic cave temples of India and the art of Southeast Asia.[7][8][9]

Tantric Hindu and Buddhist traditions have also influenced other Eastern religious traditions such as Jainism, the Tibetan Bön tradition, Daoism, and the Japanese Shintō tradition.[10] Certain modes of worship, such as Puja, are considered tantric in their conception and rituals. Hindu temple building also generally conforms to the iconography of tantra.[note 1][11] Hindu texts describing these topics are called Tantras, Āgamas or Samhitās.[12][13] Though Western views often equate Tantra with sex, scholars emphasize that sexual practices in tantric traditions are rare, highly restricted to initiated adepts, and serve as a means of spiritual transcendence rather than an end in themselves.

Etymology

Tantra (Sanskrit: तन्त्र) literally means "loom, warp, weave".[14][2][15] According to Padoux, the verbal root Tan means: "to extend", "to spread", "to spin out", "weave", "display", "put forth", and "compose". Therefore, by extension, it can also mean "system", "doctrine", or "work".[16]

The connotation of the word tantra to mean an esoteric practice or religious ritualism is a colonial era European invention.[17][18][19] This term is based on the metaphor of weaving, states Ron Barrett, where the Sanskrit root tan means the warping of threads on a loom.[2] It implies "interweaving of traditions and teachings as threads" into a text, technique or practice.[2][15]

The word appears in the hymns of the Rigveda such as in 10.71, with the meaning of "warp (weaving)".[14] It is found in many other Vedic era texts, such as in section 10.7.42 of the Atharvaveda and many Brahmanas.[14][20] In these and post-Vedic texts, the contextual meaning of Tantra is that which is "principal or essential part, main point, model, framework, feature".[14] In the Smritis and epics of Hinduism (and Jainism), the term means "doctrine, rule, theory, method, technique or chapter" and the word appears both as a separate word and as a common suffix, such as atma-tantra meaning "doctrine or theory of Atman (Self)".[14][20]

The term "Tantra" after about 500 BCE, in Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism is a bibliographic category, just like the word Sutra (which means "sewing together", mirroring the metaphor of "weaving together" in Tantra). The same Buddhist texts are sometimes referred to as tantra or sutra; for example, Vairocabhisambodhi-tantra is also referred to as Vairocabhisambodhi-sutra.[21] The various contextual meanings of the word Tantra vary with the Indian text and are summarized in the appended table.

Appearance of the term "Tantra" in Indian texts

Period[note 2]	Text or author	Contextual meaning of tantra
1500–1100 BCE	Ṛigveda X, 71.9	Loom (or weaving device)[22]
1200–1000 BCE	Sāmaveda, Tandya Brahmana	Essence (or "main part", perhaps denoting the quintessence of the Śāstras)[22]
1200–900 BCE	Atharvaveda X, 7.42	Loom (or weaving)[22]
1200–800 BCE	Yajurveda, Taittiriya Brahmana 11.5.5.3	Loom (or weaving)[22]
800-600 BCE	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa	Essence (or main part; see above)[22]
600–500 BCE	Pāṇini in Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.4.54 and 5.2.70	Warp (weaving), loom[23]
350–283 BCE	Chanakya on Arthaśāstra	Science[24] system or shastra[25]
300 CE	Īśvarakṛṣṇa author of Sāṅkhya Kārikā (kārikā 70)	Doctrine (identifies Sankhya as a tantra)[26]
320 CE	Viṣṇu Purāṇa	Practices and rituals[27]
320–400 CE	Poet Kālidāsa on Abhijñānaśākuntalam	Deep understanding or mastery of a topic[note 3]
423	Gangdhar stone inscription in Rajasthan	Worship techniques (Tantrodbhuta)[28]
		Dubious link to Tantric practices.[29]
500 [30]	Hindu Agamas	A set of esoteric doctrines and practices, featuring archaic prosody and linguistic evidence dating back to 500 BCE.[30][31] Tantra here implies "Extensive knowledge of principles of reality".[32]
550	Sabarāsvamin's commentary on Mimamsa Sūtra 11.1.1, 11.4.1 etc.	Thread, text; [33] beneficial action or thing[25]
606–647	Sanskrit scholar and poet Bāṇabhaṭṭa (in Harṣacarita[note 4] and in Kādambari), in Bhāsa's Cārudatta and in Śūdraka's Mṛcchakatika	Set of sites and worship methods to goddesses or Matrikas.[28][34]
650 [35]	Vairocana's Vajracchedikā Sūtra	The first evidence of Buddhist esoteric doctrines or practices, known as Vajrayāna and sometimes also as Tantrayāna.
post-650	Buddhist tantric literature	Various Vajrayāna esoteric doctrines or practices.
975–1025	Philosopher Abhinavagupta in his Tantrāloka	Set of doctrines or practices, teachings, texts, system (synthesis of the 64 monistic āgamas and based on Kashmir Shaivism)[36][15]
1150–1200	Jayaratha, Abhinavagupta's commentator on Tantrāloka	Set of doctrines or practices, teachings
1690–1785	Bhaskararaya (philosopher)	System of thought or set of doctrines or practices, a canon[37]

Definition

Ancient and medieval era

The 5th-century BCE scholar Pāṇini in his Sūtra 1.4.54–55 of Sanskrit grammar, cryptically explains tantra through the example of "Sva-tantra" (Sanskrit: स्वतन्त्र), which he states means "independent" or a person who is his own "warp, cloth, weaver, promoter, karta (actor)".[[23](#)] Patanjali in his Mahābhāṣya quotes and accepts Panini's definition, then discusses or mentions it at a greater length, in 18 instances, stating that its metaphorical definition of "warp (weaving), extended cloth" is relevant to many contexts.[[38](#)] The word tantra, states Patanjali, means "principal, main".

He uses the same example of svatantra as a composite word of "sva" (self) and tantra, then stating "svatantra" means "one who is self-dependent, one who is his own master, the principal thing for whom is himself", thereby interpreting the definition of tantra.[23] Patanjali also offers a semantic definition of Tantra, stating that it is structural rules, standard procedures, centralized guide or knowledge in any field that applies to many elements.[38]

Starting in the early centuries of the common era, newly revealed Tantras centering on Vishnu, Shiva or Shakti emerged.[39] There are tantric lineages in all main forms of modern Hinduism, such as the Shaiva Siddhanta tradition, the Shakta sect of Shri Vidya, the Kaula, and Kashmir Shaivism.

The ancient Mimamsa school of Hinduism uses the term tantra extensively, and its scholars offer various definitions. For example:

When an action or a thing, once complete, becomes beneficial in several matters to one person, or to many people, that is known as Tantra. For example, a lamp placed amidst many priests. In contrast, that which benefits by its repetition is called Āvāpa, such as massaging with oil. (...)

—Sabara, 6th century, [25][40]

Medieval texts present their own definitions of Tantra. Kāmikā-tantra, for example, gives the following explanation of the term tantra:

Because it elaborates (tan) copious and profound matters, especially relating to the principles of reality (tattva) and sacred mantras, and because it provides liberation (tra), it is called a tantra.[32]

Modern era

The occultist and businessman Pierre Bernard (1875–1955) is widely credited with introducing the philosophy and practices of tantra to the American people, at the same time creating a somewhat misleading impression of its connection to sex.[41] That popular sexualization is more accurately regarded as the western Neo-Tantra movement.

While hugely influential on Hindu practices and ritual, the Tantric traditions are poorly understood by contemporary Hindus.[42] Likewise, western scholarship has often ignored this important aspect of Indian and Hindu-culture.[42]

Many definitions of Tantra have been proposed since, and there is no universally accepted definition.[43] André Padoux, in his review of Tantra definitions offers two, then rejects both. One definition, according to Padoux, is found among Tantra practitioners – it is any "system of observances" about the vision of man and the cosmos where correspondences between the inner world of the person and the macrocosmic reality

play an essential role. Another definition, more common among observers and non-practitioners, is some "set of mechanistic rituals, omitting entirely the ideological side". [44]

Tantric traditions have been studied mostly from textual and historical perspectives. Anthropological work on living Tantric tradition is scarce, and ethnography has rarely engaged with the study of Tantra. This is arguably a result of the modern construction of Tantrism as occult, esoteric and secret. Some scholars have tried to demystify the myth of secrecy in contemporary Tantric traditions, suggesting new methodological avenues to overcome the ethical and epistemological problems in the study of living Tantric traditions.[45]

According to David N. Lorenzen, two different kinds of definitions of Tantra exist, narrow and broad.[13] According to the narrow definition, Tantrism, or "Tantric religion", is the elite traditions directly based on the Sanskrit texts called the Tantras, Samhitas, and Agamas.[13][46] Lorenzen's "broad definition" extends this by including a broad range of "magical beliefs and practices" such as Yoga and Shaktism.[46][47]

The term "yoga" is broadly attributed to many traditions and practices, including the western assumption that yoga is synonymous with physical stretching and little more. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali define yoga as "the stilling of the disturbances of the mind". [48] Richard Payne states that Tantra has been commonly but incorrectly associated with sex, given popular culture's prurient obsession with intimacy. Tantra has been labelled as the "yoga of ecstasy", driven by senseless ritualistic libertinism.[21] This is far from the diverse and complex understanding of what Tantra means to those Buddhists, Hindu and Jains who practice it.[21]

David Gray disagrees with broad generalizations and states that defining Tantra is a difficult task because "Tantra traditions are manifold, spanning several religious traditions and cultural worlds. As a result they are also diverse, which makes it a significant challenge to come up with an adequate definition".[49] The challenge of defining Tantra is compounded by the fact that it has been a historically significant part of major Indian religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, both in and outside South Asia and East Asia.[50] To its practitioners, Tantra is defined as a combination of texts, techniques, rituals, monastic practices, meditation, yoga, and ideology.[51]

According to Georg Feuerstein,

The scope of topics discussed in the Tantras is considerable. They deal with the creation and history of the world; the names and functions of a great variety of male and female deities and other higher beings; the types of ritual worship (especially of Goddesses); magic, sorcery, and divination; esoteric "physiology" (the mapping of the subtle or psychic body); the awakening of the mysterious serpent power (kundalinî-shakti); techniques of bodily and mental purification; the nature of enlightenment; and

not least, sacred sexuality.[52]

Hindu puja, temples and iconography all show tantric influence.[note 1] These texts, states Gavin Flood, contain representation of "the body in philosophy, in ritual and in art", which are linked to "techniques of the body, methods or technologies developed within the tantric traditions intended to transform body and self".[53]

Tantrism

Mantra

Vishnu mandala

Sexual yoga

Kali Yantra

Subtle body

Kapala

Elements of Tantrism. Clockwise from upper left: Mantra (Buddhist), Mandala (Hindu), Yantra (of Kali), Skull cup (Kapala), Nadis and Chakras (Tibetan), Deities depicted in sexual union. These are neither compulsory nor universal in Tantrism.[54]

The term tantrism is a 19th-century European invention not present in any Asian language;[18] compare "Sufism", of similar Orientalist origin. According to Padoux, Tantrism is a Western term and notion, not a category that is used by Tantrikas themselves.[17] The term was introduced by 19th-century Indologists, with limited knowledge of India and in whose view Tantrism was a particular, unusual and minority practice in contrast to Indian traditions they believed to be mainstream.[17]

Robert Brown similarly notes that "tantrism" is a construct of Western scholarship, not a concept of the religious system itself.[55] He defines Tantrism as an apologetic label of Westerners for a system that they little understand that is "not coherent" and which is "an accumulated set of practices and ideas from various sources, that has varied between its practitioners within a group, varied across groups, across geography and over its history". It is a system, adds Brown, that gives each follower the freedom to mix Tantric elements with non-Tantric aspects, to challenge and transgress any and all norms, experiment with "the mundane to reach the supramundane".[43]

Teun Goudriaan in his 1981 review of Hindu Tantrism, states that Tantrism usually means a "systematic quest for salvation or spiritual excellence" by realizing and fostering the divine within one's own body, one that is simultaneous union of the masculine-feminine and spirit-matter, and has the ultimate goal of realizing the "primal blissful state of non-duality".[56] It is typically a methodically striven system, consisting of voluntarily chosen specific practices which may include Tantric items such as mantras (bijas), geometric patterns and symbols (mandala), gestures (mudra), mapping of the microcosm within one's body to the macrocosmic elements outside as the subtle body (kundalini yoga), assignments of icons and sounds (nyasa), meditation (dhyana), ritual worship (puja), initiation (diksha) and others.[57] Tantrism, adds Goudriaan, is a living system that is decidedly monistic, but with wide variations, and it is impossible to be dogmatic about a simple or fixed definition.[58]

Tantrism is an overarching term for "Tantric traditions", states David Gray in a 2016 review, that combine Vedic, yogic and meditative traditions from 5th-century Hinduism as well as rival Buddhist and Jain traditions.[42] it is a neologism of western scholars and does not reflect the self-understanding of any particular tantric tradition. While Goudriaan's description is useful, adds Gray, there is no single defining universal characteristic common to all Tantra traditions, being an open evolving system.[19] Tantrism, whether Buddhist or Hindu, can best be characterized as practices, a set of techniques, with a strong focus on rituals and meditation, by those who believe that it is a path to liberation that is characterized by both knowledge and freedom.[59]

Tantrika

According to Padoux, the term "Tantrika" is based on a comment by Kulluka Bhatta on Manava Dharmasastra 2.1, who contrasted *vaidika* and *tantrika* forms of Śruti (canonical texts). The Tantrika, to Bhatta, is that literature which forms a parallel part of the Hindu tradition, independent of the Vedic corpus. The Vedic and non-Vedic (Tantric) paths are seen as two different approaches to ultimate reality, the Vedic approach based on Brahman, and Tantrika being based on the non-Vedic Āgama texts.[60] Despite Bhatta attempt to clarify, states Padoux, in reality Hindus and Buddhists have historically felt free to borrow and blend ideas from all sources, Vedic, non-Vedic and in the case of Buddhism, its own canonical works.[61]

One of the key differences between the Tantric and non-Tantric traditions – whether it be orthodox Buddhism, Hinduism or Jainism – is their assumptions about the need for monastic or ascetic life.[62] Non-Tantrika, or orthodox traditions in all three major ancient Indian religions, hold that the worldly life of a householder is one driven by desires and greeds which are a serious impediment to spiritual liberation (*moksha*, *nirvana*, *kaivalya*). These orthodox traditions teach renunciation of householder life, a mendicant's life of simplicity and leaving all attachments to become a monk or nun. In contrast, the Tantrika traditions hold, states Robert Brown, that "both enlightenment and worldly success" are achievable, and that "this world need not be shunned to achieve enlightenment".[62][63] Yet, even this supposed categorical divergence is debatable, e.g. Bhagavad Gita v.2:48–53, including: "Yoga is skill in [the performance of] actions." [64]

Features

The Tantras emphasize spiritual practice or *sādhana*, including initiation (*dīkṣā*), rituals, and yoga. A standard ritual framework is present in the Tantras, despite variations in deities and mantras, involving body purification through symbolic dissolution, creation of a divine body or self via mantra, internal worship or *dhyāna* (visualization), and external worship or *pūjā*, utilizing hand gestures (*mudrā*), mantra chanting, and sacred diagrams (*yantra*, *maṇḍala*). The Tantras feature complex cosmological hierarchies that incorporate earlier traditions' cosmic structures, with the highest Śaiva Siddhānta realm surpassed by additional realms in Kashmir Śaiva traditions. The body is seen as divine, containing the cosmic order, reflecting the polarity of the male deity and his consort, the

feminine energy, often Shiva and his Shakti as Goddess Kuṇḍalinī, with their union symbolizing liberation. The Tantras focus on attaining mystical powers (siddhi) and experiencing bliss in higher realms (bhoga) as part of the practitioner's spiritual journey, also interpreted as the movement of Kuṇḍalinī through the body. The Tantras address possession (āveśa) and the practice of exorcism.[65]

History

Proto-tantric elements in Indian religions

While Tantra arose in the 5th century CE in Shaivite religions, practices and ideas can be found in Indian religion and history which may have been formative to Tantric practices and ideas.

Proto-tantric elements in Vedic religion

Rig Veda

The Keśin hymn of the Rig Veda (10.136) describes the "wild loner" who, states Karel Werner, "carrying within oneself fire and poison, heaven and earth, ranging from enthusiasm and creativity to depression and agony, from the heights of spiritual bliss to the heaviness of earth-bound labor".[66] The Rigveda uses words of admiration for these loners,[66] and whether it is related to Tantra or not, has been variously interpreted. According to David Lorenzen, it describes munis (sages) experiencing Tantra-like "ecstatic, altered states of consciousness" and gaining the ability "to fly on the wind".[67] In contrast, Werner suggests that these are early Yoga pioneers and accomplished yogis of the ancient pre-Buddhist Indian tradition, and that this Vedic hymn is speaking of those "lost in thoughts" whose "personalities are not bound to earth, for they follow the path of the mysterious wind".[66] However, Patrick Olivelle suggests that in the early Vedic-Brahmanical texts, some of which predate the 3rd-century BCE ruler Ashoka, Brahmana and Śramaṇa (ascetics) were neither distinct nor opposed. The later distinctions were semantic developments possibly influenced by the appropriation of the term Śramaṇa by Buddhism and Jainism.[68]

Upanishads

The two oldest Upanishadic scriptures of Hinduism, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in section 4.2 and Chandogya Upanishad in section 8.6, refer to nadis (hati) in presenting their theory on how the Atman (Self) and the body are connected and interdependent through energy carrying arteries when one is awake or sleeping, but they do not mention anything related to Tantric practices.[69] The Shvetashvatara Upanishad describes breath control that became a standard part of Yoga, but Tantric practices do not appear in it.[67][70] Likewise, the Taittiriya Upanishad discusses a central channel running through the body and various Vedic texts mention the bodily pranas (vital breaths) that move around in the body and animate it. However, the idea of consciously moving the bodily pranas through yoga is not found in these sources.[71] According to Lorenzen, Vedic ideas related to the body later diversified into the "mystical anatomy" of nadis and chakras found in Tantra.[72] The yogic component of Tantrism appears clearly in Bāṇabhaṭṭa's Harshacharita and Daṇḍin's Dashakumaracharita.[73] In contrast to this theory of Lorenzen, other scholars such as Mircea Eliade consider Yoga and the

evolution of Yogic practices to be separate and distinct from the evolution of Tantra and Tantric practices.[74]

Tapas and spiritualized sexual energy

According to Geoffrey Samuel, the inner development of a spiritual energy called tapas becomes a central element of Vedic religion in the Brahmanas and Srauta texts. In these texts, ascetic practices allow a holy man to build up tapas, a kind of magical inner heat, which allows them to perform all sorts of magical feats as well as granting visions and divine revelations.[75] Samuel also notes that in the Mahabharata, one of the commonest use of the term "yoga" refers to "a dying warrior transferring himself at death to the sphere of the sun through yoga, a practice that links up with Upanisadic references to the channel to the crown of the head as the pathway by which one can travel through the solar orb to the World of Brahman." This practice of transferring one's consciousness at death is still an important practice in Tibetan Buddhism.[76] Samuel also notes that sexual rituals and a spiritualized sexuality are mentioned in the late Upanishads. According to Samuel, "late Vedic texts treat sexual intercourse as symbolically equivalent to the Vedic sacrifice, and ejaculation of semen as the offering." This theme can be found in the Jaiminiya Brahmana, the Chandogya Upanisad, and the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad. The Brhadaranyaka contains various sexual rituals and practices which are mostly aimed at obtaining a child which are concerned with the loss of male virility and power.[77]

Yogini cults

David Gordon White views Yogini cults as foundational to early tantra but disagrees with scholars who maintain that the roots of such cults lie in an "autochthonous non-Vedic source" such as indigenous tribes or the Indus Valley civilization.[78] Instead, White suggests Vedic Srauta texts mention offerings to goddesses Rākā, Sinīvālī, and Kuhū in a manner similar to a tantric ritual.[79]

Atharvaveda

Frederick Smith – a professor of Sanskrit and Classical Indian Religions, considers Tantra to be a religious movement parallel to the Bhakti movement of the 1st millennium CE.[80] Tantra along with Ayurveda, states Smith, has traditionally been attributed to Atharvaveda, but this attribution is one of respect not of historicity. Ayurveda has primarily been an empirical practice with Vedic roots, but Tantra has been an esoteric, folk movement without grounding that cannot be traced to anything in Atharvaveda or any other vedic text.[80]

Proto-Tantric elements in Buddhism

A Buddhist dhāraṇī (incantation), the Nilanṭhanāmahṛdaya dhāraṇī, in Siddham Script with Chinese transliteration

Kushan sculpture of a yakṣiṇī (2nd century), Mathura region

Pre-tantric Buddhism contains elements which could be seen as proto-tantric, and which

may have influenced the development of the Buddhist Tantric tradition. The use of magical chants or incantations can be found in the early Buddhist texts as well as in some Mahayana sutras.[81] These magical spells or chants were used for various reasons, such as for protection, and for the generation of auspiciousness.[82] Mahayana incantations are called *dhāraṇīs*. Some Mahayana sutras incorporate the use of mantras, a central feature of tantric practice.

According to Geoffrey Samuel, sramana groups like the Buddhists and Jains were associated with the dead. Samuel notes that they "frequently settled at sites associated with the dead and seem to have taken over a significant role in relation to the spirits of the dead." To step into this realm required entering a dangerous and impure supernatural realm from the Indian perspective. This association with death remains a feature of modern Buddhism, and in Buddhist countries today, Buddhist monks and other ritual specialists are in charge of the dead.[83] Thus, the association of tantric practitioners with charnel grounds and death imagery is preceded by early Buddhist contact with these sites of the dead.

Some scholars think that the development of tantra may have been influenced by the cults of nature spirit-deities like Yakṣas and Nagas.[84] Yakṣa cults were an important part of early Buddhism. Yakṣas are powerful nature spirits which were sometimes seen as guardians or protectors.[85] Yakṣas like Kubera are also associated with magical incantations. Kubera is said to have provided the Buddhist sangha with protection spells in the *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta*. [86] These spirit deities also included numerous female deities (*yakṣiṇī*) that can be found depicted in major Buddhist sites like Sanchi and Bharhut. In early Buddhist texts there is also mention of fierce demon like deities called *rākṣasa* and *rākṣasī*, like the children-eating *Hārītī*. [87] They are also present in Mahayana texts, such as in Chapter 26 of the Lotus Sutra which includes a dialogue between the Buddha and a group of *rākṣasīs*, who swear to uphold and protect the sutra. These figures also teach magical *dhāraṇīs* to protect followers of the Lotus Sutra. [88]

A key element of Buddhist Tantric practice is the visualization of deities in meditation. This practice is actually found in pre-tantric Buddhist texts as well. In Mahayana sutras like the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi* and the three Amitabha Pure land sutras. [89] There are other Mahāyāna sutras which contain what may be called "proto-tantric" material such as the *Gandavyuha* and the *Dasabhumika* which might have served as a source for the imagery found in later Tantric texts. [90] According to Samuel, the Golden Light Sutra (c. 5th century at the latest) contains what could be seen as a proto-mandala. In the second chapter, a bodhisattva has a vision of "a vast building made of beryl and with divine jewels and celestial perfumes. Four lotus-seats appear in the four directions, with four Buddhas seated upon them: Aksobhya in the East, Ratnaketu in the South, Amitayus in the West and Dundubhīśvara in the North." [91]

A series of artwork discovered in Gandhara, in modern-day Pakistan, dating from about the 1st century CE, show Buddhist and Hindu monks holding skulls. [92] The legend corresponding to these artworks is found in Buddhist texts, and describes monks "who

tap skulls and forecast the future rebirths of the person to whom that skull belonged".[92][93] According to Robert Brown, these Buddhist skull-tapping reliefs suggest that tantric practices may have been in vogue by the 1st century CE.[92]

Proto-Tantric elements in Shaktism and Shaivism

A modern aghori with a skull-cup (Kapala). Their predecessors, the medieval Kapalikas ("Skull-men") were influential figures in the development of transgressive or "left hand" Shaiva tantra.

The Mahabharata, the Harivamsa, and the Devi Mahatmya in the Markandeya Purana all mention the fierce, demon-killing manifestations of the Great Goddess, Mahishamardini, identified with Durga-Parvati.[94] These suggest that Shaktism, reverence and worship for the Goddess in Indian culture, was an established tradition by the early centuries of the 1st millennium.[95] Padoux mentions an inscription from 423 to 424 CE which mentions the founding of a temple to terrifying deities called "the mothers".[96] However, this does not mean Tantric rituals and practices were as yet a part of either Hindu or Buddhist traditions. "Apart from the somewhat dubious reference to Tantra in the Gangadhar inscription of 423 CE", states David Lorenzen, it is only 7th-century Banabhatta's Kadambari which provide convincing proof of Tantra and Tantric texts.[29]

Shaivite ascetics seem to have been involved in the initial development of Tantra, particularly the transgressive elements dealing with the charnel ground. According to Samuel, one group of Shaiva ascetics, the Pasupatas, practiced a form of spirituality that made use of shocking and disreputable behavior later found in a tantric context, such as dancing, singing, and smearing themselves with ashes.[97]

Early Tantric practices are sometimes attributed to Shaiva ascetics associated with Bhairava, the Kapalikas ("skull men", also called Somasiddhatins or Mahavartins).[98] [99][100] Besides the shocking fact that they frequented cremation grounds and carried human skulls, little is known about them, and there is a paucity of primary sources on the Kapalikas.[101][100] Samuel also states that the sources depict them as using alcohol and sex freely, that they were associated with terrifying female spirit-deities called yoginis and dakinis, and that they were believed to possess magical powers, such as flight.[102]

Kapalikas are depicted in fictional works and also widely disparaged in Buddhist, Hindu and Jain texts of the 1st millennium CE.[101][103] In Hāla's Gatha-saptasati (composed by the 5th century AD), for example, the story calls a female character Kapalika, whose lover dies, he is cremated, she takes his cremation ashes and smears her body with it. [99] The 6th-century Varāhamihira mentions Kapalikas in his literary works.[103] Some of the Kāpālīka practices mentioned in these texts are those found in Shaiva Hinduism and Vajrayana Buddhism, and scholars disagree on who influenced whom.[104][105]

These early historical mentions are in passing and appear to be Tantra-like practices,

they are not detailed nor comprehensive presentation of Tantric beliefs and practices. Epigraphic references to the Kaulas Tantric practices are rare. Reference is made in the early 9th century to vama (left-hand) Tantras of the Kaulas.[106] Literary evidence suggests Tantric Buddhism was probably flourishing by the 7th century.[67] Matrikas, or fierce mother goddesses that later are closely linked to Tantra practices, appear both in Buddhist and Hindu arts and literature between the 7th and 10th centuries.[107]

Rise and development

Main articles: Tantras (Hinduism) and Tantras (Buddhism)

Dancing Bhairava in the Indian Museum, Kolkata

Dancing Vajravārāhī, a Buddhist tantric deity, Nepal, 11th–12th century

Illustration of a yogi and their chakras

Buddhist Mahasiddhas practicing the sexual yoga of karmamudrā ("action seal") According to Peter C. Bisschop, the expansion of the Pāśupata Śaivite movement (early CE) throughout North India gave rise to different forms of Śaivism, eventually leading to the emergence of various tantric traditions.[108]

According to David B. Gray, Vajrayana originated from pre-existing Tantric traditions, also known as 'Tantrism', which emerged within Hinduism during the first millennium CE. These early Hindu tantric practices had a profound influence on South Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, leading to the emergence of distinct Buddhist tantric traditions in the 7th century CE. These traditions quickly spread across Southeast, East, and Central Asia, giving rise to unique forms in East Asia and Tibet.[109]

According to Gavin Flood, the earliest date for the Tantra texts related to Tantric practices is 600 CE, though most of them were probably composed after the 8th century onwards.[110] According to Flood, very little is known about who created the Tantras, nor much is known about the social status of these and medieval era Tantrikas.[111]

Flood states that the pioneers of Tantra may have been ascetics who lived at the cremation grounds, possibly from "above low-caste groups", and were probably non-Brahmanical and possibly part of an ancient tradition.[112][113][114] By the early medieval times, their practices may have included the imitation of deities such as Kali and Bhairava, with offerings of non-vegetarian food, alcohol and sexual substances. According to this theory, these practitioners would have invited their deities to enter them, then reverted the role in order to control that deity and gain its power.[111] These ascetics would have been supported by low castes living at the cremation places.[111]

According to Samuel, a key element in the development of tantra was "the gradual transformation of local and regional deity cults through which fierce male and, particularly, female deities came to take a leading role in the place of the yaksa deities."

Samuel states that this took place between the fifth to eighth centuries CE.[115] According to Samuel, there are two main scholarly opinions on these terrifying goddesses which became incorporated into Śaiva and Buddhist Tantra. The first view is that they originate out of a pan-Indian religious substrate that was not Vedic. Another opinion is to see these fierce goddesses as developing out of the Vedic religion.[116]

Alexis Sanderson has argued that tantric practices originally developed in a Śaiva milieu and were later adopted by Buddhists. He cites numerous elements that are found in the Śaiva Vidyapitha literature, including whole passages and lists of pithas, that seem to have been directly borrowed by Vajrayana texts.[117] This has been criticized by Ronald M. Davidson, however, due to the uncertain date of the Vidyapitha texts.[118] Davidson argues that the pithas seem to have been neither uniquely Buddhist nor Śaiva, but frequented by both groups. He also states that the Śaiva tradition was also involved in the appropriation of local deities and that tantra may have been influenced by tribal Indian religions and their deities.[119] Samuel writes that "the female divinities may well best be understood in terms of a distinct Śākta milieu from which both Śaivas and Buddhists were borrowing",[120] but that other elements, like the Kapalika style practices, are more clearly derived from a Śaiva tradition.[120]

There is considerable evidence that the Hevajra and Cakrasamvara tantras borrow significant portions from Saiva sources. The text Cakrasamvara and its commentaries have revealed numerous attempts by the Buddhists to enlarge and modify it, both to remove references to Saiva deities and to add more Buddhist technical terminology. [121]

Vamachara and Dakshinachara

Vamachara

Vamachara is used to describe a particular mode of tantric worship or sadhana (spiritual practice) that uses heterodox methods to sublimate for spiritual growth. These tantric practices also included secret initiation ceremonies in which individuals would enter the tantric family (kula) and receive the secret mantras of the tantric deities. These initiations included the consumption of the sexual substances (semen and female sexual secretions) produced through ritual sex between the guru and his consort. These substances were seen as spiritually powerful and were also used as offerings for tantric deities.[122] For both Śaivas and Buddhists, tantric practices often took place at important sacred sites (pithas) associated with fierce goddesses.[123] Samuel writes that "we do not have a clear picture of how this network of pilgrimage sites arose." Whatever the case, it seems that it was in these ritual spaces visited by both Buddhists and Śaivas that the practice of Kaula and Anuttarayoga Tantra developed during the eighth and ninth centuries.[124] Besides the practices outlined above, these sites also saw the practice of animal sacrifice as blood offerings to Śākta goddesses like Kamakhya. This practice is mentioned in Śākta texts like the Kālikāpurāṇa and the Yoginītantra. In some of these sites, such as Kamakhya Pitha, animal sacrifice is still widely practiced by Śāktas.[125] Samuel states that transgressive and antinomian tantric practices developed in both Buddhist and Brahmanical (mainly Śaiva ascetics like

the Kapalikas) contexts and that "Śaivas and Buddhists borrowed extensively from each other, with varying degrees of acknowledgement." According to Samuel, these deliberately transgressive practices included, "night time orgies in charnel grounds, involving the eating of human flesh, the use of ornaments, bowls and musical instruments made from human bones, sexual relations while seated on corpses, and the like." [126] Samuel writes that the Saiva Tantra tradition appears to have originated as ritual sorcery carried out by hereditary caste groups (kulas) and associated with sex, death and fierce goddesses. The initiation rituals involved the consumption of the mixed sexual secretions (the clan essence) of a male guru and his consort. These practices were adopted by Kapalika styled ascetics and influenced the early Nath siddhas. Over time, the more extreme external elements were replaced by internalized yogas that make use of the subtle body. Sexual ritual became a way to reach the liberating wisdom taught in the tradition. [127]

Another key and innovative feature of medieval tantric systems was the development of internal yogas based on elements of the subtle body (sūkṣma śarīra). This subtle anatomy held that there were channels in the body (nadis) through which certain substances or energies (such as vayu, prana, kundalini, and shakti) flowed. These yogas involved moving these energies through the body to clear out certain knots or blockages (granthi) and to direct the energies to the central channel (avadhuti, sushumna). These yogic practices are also closely related to the practice of sexual yoga, since sexual intercourse was seen as being involved in the stimulation of the flow of these energies. [128] Samuel thinks that these subtle body practices may have been influenced by Chinese Daoist practices. [129]

One of the earliest mentions of sexual yoga practice is in the Buddhist Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra of Asanga (c. 5th century), which states "Supreme self-control is achieved in the reversal of sexual intercourse in the blissful Buddha-poise and the untrammelled vision of one's spouse." [130] According to David Snellgrove, the text's mention of a 'reversal of sexual intercourse' might indicate the practice of withholding ejaculation. Snellgrove states that it is possible that sexual yoga was already being practiced in Buddhist circles at this time, and that Asanga saw it as a valid practice. [131] Likewise, Samuel thinks that there is a possibility that sexual yoga existed in the fourth or fifth centuries (though not in the same transgressive tantric contexts where it was later practiced). [132]

It is only in the seventh and eighth centuries however that we find substantial evidence for these sexual yogas. Unlike previous Upanishadic sexual rituals however, which seem to have been associated with Vedic sacrifice and mundane ends like childbirth, these sexual yogas were associated with the movement of subtle body energies (like Kundalini and Chandali, which were also seen as goddesses), and also with spiritual ends. [133] These practices seemed to have developed at around the same time in both Saiva and Buddhist circles, and are associated with figures such as Tirumūlar, Gorakhnath, Virupa, Naropa. The tantric mahasiddhas developed yogic systems with subtle body and sexual elements which could lead to magical powers (siddhis), immortality, as well as spiritual

liberation (moksha, nirvana). Sexual yoga was seen as one way of producing a blissful expansion of consciousness that could lead to liberation.[132]

According to Jacob Dalton, ritualized sexual yoga (along with the sexual elements of the tantric initiation ritual, like the consumption of sexual fluids) first appears in Buddhist works called Mahayoga tantras (which include the Guhyagarbha and Guhyasamaja). [134][135] These texts "focused on the body's interior, on the anatomical details of the male and female sexual organs and the pleasure generated through sexual union." In these texts, sexual energy was also seen as a powerful force that could be harnessed for spiritual practice and according to Samuel "perhaps create the state of bliss and loss of personal identity which is homologised with liberating insight." [134] These sexual yogas continued to develop further into more complex systems which are found in texts dating from about the ninth or tenth century, including the Saiva Kaulajñānanirṇaya and Kubjikātantra as well as the Buddhist Hevajra, and Cakrasamvara tantras which make use of charnel ground symbolism and fierce goddesses.[136] Samuel writes that these later texts also combine the sexual yoga with a system of controlling the energies of the subtle body.[129]

The Buddhists developed their own corpus of Tantras, which also drew on various Mahayana doctrines and practices, as well as on elements of the fierce goddess tradition and also on elements from the Śaiva traditions (such as deities like Bhairava, which were seen as having been subjugated and converted to Buddhism).[110][137] Some Buddhist tantras (sometimes called "lower" or "outer" tantras) which are earlier works, do not make use of transgression, sex and fierce deities. These earlier Buddhist tantras mainly reflect a development of Mahayana theory and practice (like deity visualization) and a focus on ritual and purity.[138] Between the eighth and tenth centuries, new tantras emerged which included fierce deities, kula style sexual initiations, subtle body practices and sexual yoga. The later Buddhist tantras are known as the "inner" or "unsurpassed yoga" (Anuttarayoga or "Yogini") tantras. According to Samuel, it seems that these sexual practices were not initially practiced by Buddhist monastics and instead developed outside of the monastic establishments among traveling siddhas.[139]

Dakshinachara

Dakshinachara is used to describe tantric sects that do not engage in heterodox practices. The Brahma Yamala, a tantric text, asserts that there are three currents of tradition (dakshina, vama, and madhyama) characterized respectively by the predominance of each of the three gunas (sattva, rajas, and tamas). According to this text, dakshina is characterized by sattva, and is pure; madhyama (a balance of the two), characterized by rajas, is mixed; and vama, characterized by tamas, is impure. The tantras of each class follow a particular line of spiritual practice.[140] N. N. Bhattacharyya explains the Sanskrit technical term ācāra as follows:

The means of spiritual attainment which varies from person to person according to competence.... Ācāras are generally of seven kinds – Veda, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Dakṣiṇa,

Vāma, Siddhānta, and Kaula, falling into two broad categories – Dakṣiṇa and Vāma. Interpretations vary regarding the nature and grouping of the ācāras.[141]

Tantric age

Twelve-Armed Chakrasamvara and His Consort Vajravahni, c. 12th century, India (Bengal) or Bangladesh

Yogini, East India, 11th–12th century CE. Matsuo Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan

A stone Kālacakra Mandala at the Hiraṇyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, a Buddhist temple in Patan, Nepal, built in the 12th century

From the 8th to the 14th century, Tantric traditions rose to prominence and flourished throughout India and beyond.[142][143][18][144] By the 10th century, the main elements of tantric practice had reached maturity and were being practiced in Saiva and Buddhist contexts. This period has been referred to as the 'Tantric Age' by some scholars due to prevalence of Tantra.[145] Also by the 10th century, numerous tantric texts (variously called Agamas, Samhitas and Tantras) had been written, particularly in Kashmir, Nepal and Bengal.[146] By this time, Tantric texts had also been translated into regional languages such as Tamil, and Tantric practices had spread across South Asia.[147] Tantra also spread into Tibet, Indonesia and China. Gavin Flood describes the Tantric age as follows:

Tantrism has been so pervasive that all of Hinduism after the eleventh century, perhaps with the exception of the vedic Śrauta tradition, is influenced by it. All forms of Saiva, Vaisnava and Smārta religion, even those forms which wanted to distance themselves from Tantrism, absorbed elements derived from the Tantras.[147]

Though the whole northern and Himalayan part of India was involved in the development of tantra, Kashmir was a particularly important center, both Saiva and Buddhist and numerous key tantric texts were written there according to Padoux.[148] According to Alexis Sanderson, the Śaiva Tantra traditions of medieval Kashmir were mainly divided between the dualistic Śaiva Siddhanta and the non-dualist theology found in Śākta lineages like the Trika, Krama and Kaula. The non-dualists generally accepted and made use of sexual and transgressive practices, while the dualists mostly rejected them.[149] Saiva tantra was especially successful because it managed to forge strong ties with South Asian kings who valued the power (shakti) of fierce deities like the warrior goddess Durga as a way to increase their own royal power. These kings took part in royal rituals led by Saiva "royal gurus" in which they were symbolically married to tantric deities and thus became the earthly representative of male gods like Shiva. Saiva tantra could also employ a variety of protection and destruction rituals which could be used for the benefit of the kingdom and the king.[150] Tantric Shaivism was adopted by the kings of Kashmir, as well as by the Somavamshis of Odisha, the Kalachuris, and the Chandelas of Jejakabhukti (in Bundelkhand).[151] There is also evidence of state support from the Cambodian Khmer Empire.[152] As noted by Samuel, in spite of the

increased depiction of female goddesses, these tantric traditions all seemed to have been mostly "male-directed and male-controlled."[153]

During the Tantric Age, Buddhist Tantra was embraced by the Mahayana Buddhist mainstream and was studied at the great universities such as Nalanda and Vikramashila, from which it spread to Tibet and to the East Asian states of China, Korea, and Japan. This new Tantric Buddhism was supported by the Pala Dynasty (8th–12th century) which supported these centers of learning and also built grand tantric temples and monasteries such as Somapura Mahavihara and Odantapuri while establishing good relations with the Tibetan Empire and Srivijaya Empire where the Buddhist Mahasiddhas of the Vajrayana tradition spread their influence via songs of realization like those collected in the Charyapada which were orally transmitted in various lineages and translated into many different languages over time.[154][155] The later Khmer kings and the Indonesian Srivijaya kingdom also supported tantric Buddhism. According to Samuel, while the sexual and transgressive practices were mostly undertaken in symbolic form (or through visualization) in later Tibetan Buddhist monastic contexts, it seems that in the eighth to tenth century Indian context, they were actually performed. [156]

In the 10th and 11th centuries, both Shaiva and Buddhist tantra evolved into more tame, philosophical, and liberation-oriented religions. This transformation saw a move from external and transgressive rituals towards a more internalized yogic practice focused on attaining spiritual insight. This recasting also made tantric religions much less open to attack by other groups. In Shaivism, this development is often associated with the Kashmiri master Abhinavagupta (c. 950 – 1016 CE) and his followers, as well the movements which were influenced by their work, like the Sri Vidya tradition (which spread as far as South India, and has been referred to as "high" tantra).[157]

In Buddhism, this taming of tantra is associated with the adoption of tantra by Buddhist monastics who sought to incorporate it within the Buddhist Mahayana scholastic framework. Buddhist tantras were written down and scholars like Abhayakaragupta wrote commentaries on them. Another important figure, the Bengali teacher Atisha, wrote a treatise which placed tantra as the culmination of a graduated Mahayana path to awakening, the Bodhipathapradīpa. In his view, one needed to first begin practicing non-tantric Mahayana, and then later one might be ready for tantra. This system became the model for tantric practice among some Tibetan Buddhist schools, like the Gelug. In Tibet, the transgressive and sexual practices of tantra became much less central and tantric practice was seen as suitable only for a small elite group.[158] New tantras continued to be composed during this later period as well, such as the Kalachakra (c. 11th century), which seems to be concerned with converting Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, and uniting them together against Islam. The Kalachakra teaches sexual yoga, but also warns not to introduce the practice of ingesting impure substances to beginners, since this is only for advanced yogis. This tantra also seems to want to minimize the impact of the transgressive practices, since it advises tantrikas to outwardly follow the customs of their country.[159]

Another influential development during this period was the codification of tantric yogic techniques that would later become the separate movement known as Hatha Yoga. According to James Mallinson, the original "source text" for Hatha Yoga is the Vajrayana Buddhist *Amṛtasiddhi* (11th century CE) attributed to the mahasiddha Virupa. This text was later adopted by Saiva yogic traditions (such as the Naths) and is quoted in their texts.[160][161]

Another tradition of Hindu Tantra developed among the Vaishnavas, this was called the Pāñcarātra Agama tradition. This tradition avoided the transgressive and sexual elements that were embraced by the Saivas and the Buddhists.[127] There is also a smaller tantric tradition associated with Surya, the sun god. Jainism also seems to have developed a substantial Tantra corpus based on the Saura tradition, with rituals based on yakshas and yakshinis. However, this Jain tantrism was mainly used for pragmatic purposes like protection, and was not used to attain liberation. Complete manuscripts of these Jain tantras have not survived.[162][163] The Jains also seem to have adopted some of the subtle body practices of tantra, but not sexual yoga.[129] The Svetambara thinker Hemacandra (c. 1089–1172) discusses tantric practices extensively, such as internal meditations on chakras, which betray Kaula and Nath influences.[164]

Reception and later developments

Tantric goddess Bhairavi and her consort Shiva depicted as Kāpālīka ascetics, sitting in a charnel ground. Painting by Payāg from a 17th-century manuscript (c. 1630–1635), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

There seems to have been some debate regarding the appropriateness of tantra. Among the Hindus, those belonging to the more orthodox Vedic traditions rejected the Tantras. Meanwhile, tantrikas incorporated Vedic ideas within their own systems, while considering the Tantras as the higher, more refined understanding.[162] Meanwhile, some Tantrikas considered the Tantras to be superior to the Vedas, while others considered them complementary such as Umapati, who is quoted as stating: "The Veda is the cow, the true Agama its milk." [165]

According to Samuel, the great Advaita philosopher Shankara (9th century) "is portrayed in his biography, the *Sankaravijaya*, as condemning the approaches of various kinds of Tantric practitioners and defeating them through argument or spiritual power." He also is said to have encouraged the replacement of fierce goddesses with benign female deities, and thus to have promoted the Sri Vidya tradition (which worships a peaceful and sweet goddess, Tripura Sundari). Though it is far from certain that Shankara actually campaigned against tantra, he is traditionally seen as someone who purified Hinduism from transgressive and antinomian tantric practices.[166]

The 14th-century Indian scholar Mādhavācārya (in *Sarva-Darsana-Sangraha*) wrote copious commentaries on then existing major schools of Indian philosophies and practices, and cited the works of the 10th century Abhinavagupta, who was considered

a major and influential Tantra scholar.[167] However, Madhavacharya does not mention Tantra as a separate, distinct religious or ritual-driven practice. The early 20th-century Indian scholar Pandurang Vaman Kane conjectured that Madhavacharya ignored Tantra because it may have been considered scandalous. In contrast, Padoux suggests that Tantra may have been so pervasive by the 13th century that "it was not regarded as being a distinct system." [167]

Hindu tantra, while practiced by some of the general lay population, was eventually overshadowed by the more popular Bhakti movements that swept throughout India from the 15th century onwards. According to Samuel, "these new devotional styles of religion, with their emphasis on emotional submission to a supreme saviour-deity, whether Saivite or Vaisnavite, were better adapted, perhaps, to the subaltern role of non-Muslim groups under Muslim rule." [168] Saiva tantra did remain an important practice among most Saiva ascetics however. [169] Tantric traditions also survived in certain regions, such as among the Naths of Rajasthan, in the Sri Vidya tradition of South India and in the Bengali Bauls. [168]

In Buddhism, while tantra became accepted in the great Mahayana establishments of Nalanda and Vikramashila and spread to the Himalayan regions, it also experienced serious setbacks in other regions, particularly Southeast Asia. In Burma, for example, King Anawratha (1044–1077) is said to have disbanded tantric "Ari" monks. As Theravada Buddhism became dominant in South East Asian states, tantric religions became marginalised in those regions. [170] In Sri Lanka, tantric Buddhism also suffered debilitating setbacks. Initially the large Abhayagiri Monastery was a place where the practice of Vajrayana seems to have flourished during the 8th century. However, Abhayagiri was disbanded and forced to convert to the orthodox Mahāvihāra sect during the reign of Parakramabahu I (1153–1186). [171]

Regarding the reception of tantra during the period of Hindu modernism in the 19th and 20th centuries, Samuel writes that this period saw "a radical reframing of yogic practices away from the Tantric context." Samuel notes that while Hindu Hatha yoga had its origins in a Saiva tantric context,

Given the extremely negative views of Tantra and its sexual and magical practices which prevailed in middle-class India in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and still largely prevail today, this was an embarrassing heritage. Much effort was given by people such as Swami Vivekananda into reconstructing yoga, generally in terms of a selective Vedantic reading of Patañjali's Yogasutra (de Michelis 2004). The effort was largely successful, and many modern Western practitioners of yoga for health and relaxation have little or no knowledge of its original function as a preparation for the internal sexual practices of the Nath tradition. [169]

Buddhist tantra has survived in modern Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, in various Japanese traditions such as Shingon, and in the Newar Buddhism of the Kathmandu Valley. [172] There are also magical quasi-tantric traditions in Southeast Asia, sometimes termed

Esoteric Southern Buddhism, though they are not called "tantric" and have been marginalised by state supported modernist forms of Theravada Buddhism.[173]

Tantric traditions

Hindu tantra

Within Hinduism, the word tantra often refers to a text, which may or may not be "tantric." Conversely, various tantric texts are actually not always called tantras (instead they may be called āgama, jñāna, saṃhitā, siddhānta, vidyā).[84][174] There are also tantric Upanishads, which are late Upanishads as well as tantric Puranas (and Puranas influenced by tantric ideas).[175] Besides these types of texts, there are also various types of tantric "śāstras" (treatises) which may be "commentaries, digests, compilations, monographs, collections of hymns or of names of deities, and mantras and works on mantras." Though much of this vast body of tantric literature is in Sanskrit, others have also been written in Indian vernacular languages. As noted by Padoux, the largest portion of these tantric works are Shaiva texts.[176]

Tantric texts and practitioners ("tantrikas" and "tantrinis") are often contrasted with Vedic texts and those who practice Vedic religion ("Vaidikas"). This non-Vedic path was often termed Mantramarga ("The way of mantras") or Tantrasastra ("Tantra teaching"). One of the most well known comments on this dichotomy is Kulluka Bhatta's statement in his 15th-century commentary to the Manusmṛiti which states that revelation (sruti) is twofold – Vedic and Tantric.[174] Hindu tantric teachings are generally seen as revelations from a divine being (such as Śiva, or the Goddess) which are considered by tantrikas to be superior to the Vedas in leading beings to liberation. They are also considered to be more effective during the Kali Yuga, a time of much passion (kama). However, tantric thinkers like Abhinavagupta, while considering tantra as superior, do not totally reject Vedic teachings, and instead consider them valid on a lower level since they also derive from the same source, the supreme Godhead.[84][177]

There are various Hindu tantric traditions within Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism. [178] There are numerous tantric texts for these different traditions with different philosophical points of view, ranging from theistic dualism to absolute monism.[note 5] [179] According to David B. Gray, "one of the most important tropes in the history of the dissemination of tantric traditions is that of lineage, the transmission of teachings along an uninterrupted lineage, from master to disciple, the so-called guruparaṃparā." [84] These various traditions also differ among themselves on how heterodox and transgressive they are (vis a vis the Vedic tradition). Since tantric rituals became so widespread, certain forms of tantra were eventually accepted by many orthodox Vedic thinkers such as Jayanta Bhatta and Yamunacharya as long as they did not contradict Vedic teaching and social rules.[180] Tantric scriptures such as the Kali centered Jayadrathayāmala also state that tantrikas can follow the Vedic social rules out of convenience and for the benefit of their clan and guru.[181] However, not all Vedic thinkers accepted tantra. For example, Kumarila Bhatta wrote that one should have no contact with tantrikas nor speak to them.[182]

Śaiva and Śākta tantra

The Brihadishvara Temple, a Śaiva Siddhānta temple in Tamil Nadu

Nepalese depiction of the goddess Kali

Śrī, also known as Lalitā Tripurasundarī ("beautiful in three worlds"), Adi Parashakti (the highest supreme energy), Kāmeśvarī (goddess of desire) and other names

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Śaiva Tantra is called the Mantramārga, and is often seen as being a separate teaching than the ascetic "Atimārga" tradition (which includes the Pāśupatas and Kāpālikas).[84] [183] There are various doctrines, textual classes and schools of Shaiva Tantra, which often overlap with the Shakta tradition in different ways.

The Śaiva Siddhānta tradition is the earliest Śaiva Tantra school and was characterized by public rituals performed by priests. Some of their texts, like the Nīśvāsatattvasaṃhitā have been dated to the fifth century.[84] Their scriptures (the Śaiva Agamas) and basic doctrines are also shared by the other traditions as a common Śaiva doctrine and many of their rites are also used in other schools of Shaiva Tantra.[183] The prescriptions and rituals of the Śaiva Siddhānta Agamas are generally followed by Śaiva temples in South India and they are mostly compatible with orthodox Brahmanism, lacking terrifying deities and animal sacrifice.[184]

The Mantrapīṭha tradition on the other hand, worships Svachchanda Bhairava, a terrifying form of Shiva also known as "Aghora" ("not fearsome"). This tradition promotes the Skull observance (Kapalavrata), that is, carrying a skull, a skull staff (khatavanga) and worshipping in cremation grounds.[185] One contemporary group of Kapalika ascetics are the Aghoris.

There are also various traditions who are classified as "Vidyāpīṭha". The texts of this tradition focus on worshipping goddesses known as Yoginīs or Ḍākinīs and include antinomian practices dealing with charnel grounds and sexuality.[84] These goddess centered traditions of the Śākta tantras are mostly of the "left" current (vamachara) and

are thus considered more heterodox.[186]

There are various Vidyāpīṭha traditions, which focus on a bipolar, bisexual divinity that is equal parts male and female, Śaiva and Śākta.[84][186] The Yamalatantras worship Bhairava along with Kapalini, the goddess of the skull. The Goddess centered traditions are known as the Kulamārga (Path of the Clans), referring to the clans of the goddesses and their Shakti tantras, which may have been established around the 9th century. It includes sexual rituals, sanguinary practices, the ritual consumption of liquor and the importance of spirit possession. It includes various sub-traditions that developed in different regions of India, such as the Trika lineage (which worships a trio of deities: Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā), the tradition of the fierce goddess Guhyakālī, Krama tradition, focusing on the goddess Kālī, the Kubjikā cult, and the southern tradition which worships the beautiful goddess Kāmeśvarī or Tripurasundarī.[84][186]

During the 10th century, the syncretic nondual tradition of Kashmir Śaivism developed. According to Alexis Sanderson, this tradition arose out of the confrontation between the dualistic and more orthodox Śaiva Siddhānta and the nondual transgressive traditions of the Trika and Krama. According to David B. Gray, this school integrated elements from both of these traditions, "the end result was a nondualistic system in which the transgressive elements were internalized and hence rendered less offensive to the orthodox." [84]

The philosophers of Kashmir Śaivism, especially Abhinavagupta (c. 975–1025 ce) and his student Jayaratha, are some of the most influential philosophers who wrote on Hindu tantra.[187] These thinkers synthesized the various goddess and Śaiva lineages and philosophies into a comprehensive and influential religious system. According to David White, Abhinavagupta "sublimates, cosmeticizes, and semanticizes many of its practices into a type of meditative asceticism whose aim is to realize a transcendent subjectivity". [84] Thus, his work domesticated the radically antinomian practices of Vidyāpīṭha lineages into meditative exercises.[84]

In Nepal, the Sarvamnaya tantra system evolved as a tantrik tradition which drew upon the āmnāya system. Amnaya is often translated as 'transmission'. This system serves as the guiding source for the tradition of worship of deities that emanate from the five different aspects of Lord Śiva. At its core, the concept of Āmnāya revolves around the idea that Śiva, with his five faces, (referred to as Sadashiva), imparts the secret Tantric teachings to the goddess through her corresponding five emanations. Scholarly work on Sarvamnaya can be found in the article, "The transmission of all powers: Sarvāmnāya Śākta Tantra and the semiotics of power in Nepāla-maṇḍala" by Jeffrey S. Lidke.[188]

The last major Śaiva tantric tradition is that of the Nāth or "Split-Ear" Kānpaṭa tradition, which emerged in the 12th or 13th century. They produced various Haṭhayoga texts which draw on tantric yogas.[84][189]

While the Śākta traditions continued to develop in different ways, sometimes in a more

popular and devotional direction, many of them retain various tantric elements today. The two most important and popular Śākta tantra traditions today are the Southern Kaula transmission, which focus on the beautiful goddess Śrī (śrīkula) or Lalitā Tripurasundarī and the Northern and Eastern transmission, focusing on the ferocious goddess Kālī (kālīkula).[84] The southern transmission gave rise to the Śrī Vidyā tradition, an important tantric religion in South India. Though it takes much of its philosophical and doctrinal system from Kashmir Shaivism, it generally avoids the transgressive elements and is orthodox or "right handed". Bhaskararaya (18th century) is considered a key thinker of this tradition.[84][187] The Kālīkula tradition is particularly important in East and South India and Kālī remains a popular goddess in India, a focus of much devotion.[84]

Vaiṣṇava

The main Vaiṣṇava tradition that is associated with tantra is the Pañcharatra. This tradition produced a number of tantric texts including Lakshmi tantra, but most of the other tantras are lost. However, this sect does not identify itself as "tantric".[84] The worship and ritual of most of the Vaiṣṇava temples in South India follow this tradition, which is ritually similar to the Shaiva Siddhanta. According to Padoux, "from the doctrinal point of view, they are nearer to brahmanical orthodoxy (proudly asserted by some of their affiliates) and their mantras are indeed often Vedic."[190]

According to David B. Gray,

During the medieval period another tantric Vaiṣṇava tradition emerged in Bengal. Known as the Sahajiyā tradition, it flourished in Bengal around the 16th through 19th centuries. It taught that each individual is a divinity, embodying the divine couple Kṛṣṇa and his consort Rādhā. This tradition integrated earlier Hindu and Buddhist tantric practices within a Vaiṣṇava theological framework.[84]

Buddhist tantra

Main article: Vajrayana

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There are various Buddhist tantric traditions with the goal of attaining Enlightenment which are called by different names such as Vajrayana, Secret Mantra, Mantrayana and

so on.[191][note 6][192] The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition has been dominant in Tibet and the Himalayan regions.[191] It first spread to Tibet in the 8th century and quickly rose to prominence.[84] The Tibetan Buddhist tantric teachings have recently been spread to the Western world by the Tibetan diaspora. Nepalese Newar Buddhism meanwhile is still practiced in the Kathmandu Valley by the Newar people. The tradition maintains a canon of Sanskrit texts, the only Buddhist tantric tradition to still do so.

Buddhist Tantric practices and texts which developed from the 5th to the 8th centuries were translated into Chinese and are preserved in the Chinese Buddhist canon as well as in the Dunhuang manuscripts.[191][193] Tantric materials involving the use of mantras and dharanis began to appear in China during the fifth century period, and Buddhist masters such as Zhiyi developed proto-tantric rituals based on esoteric texts. [194] Chinese Esoteric Buddhism became especially influential in China in the Tang dynasty period with the arrival of esoteric masters such as Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra to the capital city of Chang'an.[195] The succeeding Song dynasty saw an influx of new esoteric texts being transmitted by monks from Central Asia.[196] Chinese Esoteric Buddhist rituals were also noted to be particularly popular in the Liao dynasty, which contended with the Song for control of northern China.[197] Due to the highly eclectic nature of Chinese Buddhism where sectarian denominations were not strictly drawn between the various Buddhist schools (even during the Tang dynasty), and where most Buddhist masters mixed practices from the different traditions, Chinese Esoteric Buddhist practices were absorbed by lineages from the other Buddhist traditions such as Chan and Tiantai.[198][199] For example, the Northern School of Chan even became known for its esoteric practices of dhāraṇīs and mantras.[200] During the Yuan and Ming dynasty periods, certain esoteric elements from Tibetan Buddhism were also adapted and incorporated into general Chinese Buddhist practices and rituals. In modern Chinese Buddhism, the esoteric traditions continue to be passed on and practiced through numerous tantric rituals such as the Shuilu Fahui ceremony and the Yujia Yankou rite, which involve practices like deity yoga and mandala offerings, as well as the recitation of tantric mantras such as the Cundī Dhāraṇī, the Hundred Syllable Mantra of Vajrasattva, the Mahācakravidyārāja Dhāraṇī and the Shurangama Mantra. [198][199] Esoteric practices also spread to Korea and to Japan, where it exists as an independent tradition called Shingon.[84]

Other religions

The Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions significantly influenced other religions such as Jainism, Sikhism, the Tibetan Bön tradition, Daoism, Shintō, Sufi Islam, and the Western New Age movement.[201][202][203]

In the Sikh literature, the ideas related to Shakti and goddess reverence attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, particularly in the Dasam Granth, are related to tantra ideas found in Buddhism and Hinduism.[204]

The Jain worship methods, states Ellen Gough, were likely influenced by Shaktism ideas, and this is attested by the tantric diagrams of the Rishi-mandala where the

Tirthankaras are portrayed.[205] The Tantric traditions within Jainism use verbal spells or mantra, and rituals that are believed to accrue merit for rebirth realms.[206]

Practices

One of the main elements of the Tantric literature is rituals.[207] Rather than one coherent system, Tantra is an accumulation of practices and ideas from different sources. As Samuel writes, the tantric traditions are "a confluence of a variety of different factors and components." These elements include: mandalas, mantras, internal sexual yogic practices, fierce male and female deities, cremation ground symbolism, as well as concepts from Indian Philosophy.[208]

André Padoux notes that there is no consensus among scholars as to which elements are characteristic for Tantra, nor is there any text that contains all those elements.[209] Also, most of those elements can also be found in non-Tantric traditions.[209] Because of the wide range of communities covered by the term, it is problematic to describe tantric practices definitively. However, there are sets of practices and elements which are shared by numerous tantric traditions, and thus a family resemblance relationship can be established among them.

Different scholars give different main features of tantra. For example, David N. Lorenzen writes that tantra shares various "shamanic and yogic" practices, worship of goddesses, association with specific schools like the Kaulas and Kapalikas, as well as tantric texts. [67] Christopher Wallis meanwhile, basing himself on the definition given the tantric scholar Rāmakaṇṭha, gives four main features of tantra: "1) concern with ritual modes of manipulation (of the environment or one's own awareness), 2) requirement for esoteric initiation (to receive access to the scriptural teachings and practices), 3) a twofold goal of practice: the soteriological and supramundane one of liberation (variously conceived) and/or the mundane one of extraordinary power over other beings and one's environment, and 4) the claim that these three are explicated in scriptures that are the word of God (āgama) or the Buddha (buddhavaṇana)."[210]

According to Anthony Tribe, a scholar of Buddhist Tantra, Tantra has the following defining features:[211]

Centrality of ritual, especially the worship of deities

Centrality of mantras

Visualisation of and identification with a deity

Need for initiation, esotericism and secrecy

Importance of a teacher (guru, acharya)

Ritual use of mandalas (maṇḍala)

Transgressive or antinomian acts

Revaluation of the body

Revaluation of the status and role of women

Analogical thinking (including microcosmic or macrocosmic correlation)

Revaluation of negative mental states

There are a wide array of Tantric techniques or spiritual practices (sadhana) such as:
[212]

Dakshina: Donation or gift to one's teacher
Diksha or Abhiseka: Initiation ritual which may include shaktipat
Ganachakra: A ritual feast during which a sacramental meal is offered
Guru yoga and Guru devotion (bhakti)
Mandalas and Yantras, symbolic diagrams of forces at work in the universe
Mantras: reciting syllables, words, and phrases
Mudras, or hand gestures
Nyasa, installing mantras on the body
Prāyaścitta - an expiation ritual performed if a puja has been performed wrongly
Puja (worship ritual) and other forms of bhakti
Ritual music and dance
Ritual purification (of idols, of one's body, etc.)
Ritual sacrifice, including animal sacrifice
Singing of hymns of praise (stava)
Sexual yoga: ritual sexual union (with an actual physical consort or an imagined deity)
The acquisition and use of siddhis or supernormal powers. Associated with vamaçhara ('left-hand path')
Use of taboo substances such as alcohol, cannabis, meat and other entheogens.
Visualization of deities and Identification these deities in meditation (deity yoga)
Vrata and Samaya: vows or pledges, sometimes to do ascetic practices like fasting
Yatra: pilgrimage, processions
Yoga, including breathing techniques (pranayama) and postures (asana), is employed to balance the energies in the body/mind.
Worship and ritual

A Pujari in front of a Ganesha statue, Brihadishwara Shiva Temple
Worship or puja in Hindu Tantra differs from Vedic forms somewhat. While in the Vedic practice of yajna there are no idols, shrines, and symbolic art, in tantra they are important means of worship.[213]

Rituals are particularly important in the dualistic Śaiva Siddhānta which according to Padoux "is typically characterized by an overabundance of rituals, which are necessarily accompanied by mantras. These rituals are not so much a succession of actions as a play of mentally visualized and experienced images, a situation common to all Tantric traditions, where rites, meditation, and yoga are exercises in creative identifying imagination." The theory behind these rituals is the idea that all humans have a fundamental impurity (mala) that binds them to rebirth. This impurity can be removed by ritual action (along with proper knowledge). The initial step in this path is the ritual of initiation (diksha), which opens to door to future liberation at death.[214]

In the non-dualistic and transgressive (or "left hand") traditions like the Kali cults and the Trika school, rituals and pujas can include certain left hand path elements that are not

found in the more orthodox traditions. These transgressive elements include the use of skulls and other human bone implements (as part of the Kapalika vow), fierce deities like Bhairava, Kubjika and Kali which were used as part of meditative visualizations, ritual possession by the deities (avesa), sexual rites and offering the deity (as well as consuming) certain impure substances like meat, alcohol and sexual fluids.[215] Padoux explains the transgressive practices as follows:

On the ritual and mental plane, transgression was an essential trait by which the nondualistic Tantric traditions set themselves apart from other traditions – so much so that they used the term "nondualistic practice" (advaitacara) to refer to the Kaula transgressive practices as a rejection of the duality (dvaita) of pure and impure in brahmanical society. Let us also note that for the nondualistic Saiva systems, the Yoginis were not active merely in the world of spirits; they were also powers present in humans – mistresses of their senses, governing their affects, which acquired an intensity and super-natural dimension through this divinization. This led adepts to an identification of their individual consciousness with the infinite divine Consciousness, thus also helping them transcend the sexual plane.[216]

In both the Buddhist and Saiva contexts, the sexual practices are often seen as a way to expand one's consciousness through the use of bliss.[216]

There is also a fundamental philosophical disagreement between Śaiva Siddhānta and the non-dualistic schools like the Trika regarding ritual. In Śaiva Siddhānta, only ritual can do away with "innate impurities" (anavamala) that bind individual Selves, though the ritual must be performed with an understanding of their nature and purpose as well as with devotion. In the view of the Trika school (especially in the work of Abhinavagupta), only knowledge (jñāna) which is a "recognition" (pratyabhijñā) of our true nature, leads to liberation. According to Padoux, "this is also, with nuances, the position of the Pñcaratra and of other Vaisnava Tantric traditions." [217]

Yoga, mantra, meditation

A meditating Shiva is visited by Parvati

Tantric yoga is first and foremost an embodied practice, which is seen as having a divine esoteric structure. As noted by Padoux, tantric yoga makes use of a "mystic physiology" which includes various psychosomatic elements known as the subtle body. This imaginary inner structure includes chakras ("wheels"), nadis ("channels"), and energies (like Kundalini, Chandali, different pranas and vital winds, etc.). The tantric body is also held to be a microcosmic reflection of the universe, and is thus seen as containing gods and goddesses.[218] According to Padoux, the "internalized image of the yogic body" is a fundamental element for nearly all meditative and tantric ritual practices.[219]

The use of mantras is one of the most common and widespread elements of tantric practice. They are used in rituals as well as during various meditative and yogic practices. Mantra recitation (japa) is often practiced along with nyasa ("depositing" the

mantra), mudras ("seals", i.e. hand gestures) and complex visualizations involving divine symbols, mandalas and deities. Nyasa involves touching various parts of the body while reciting mantra, which is thought to connect the deity with the yogi's body and transform the body into that of the deity.[220]

Mantras are also often visualized as being located within the yogi's body as part of tantric meditations. For example, in the "Yogini Heart" tantra, a Śrī Vidyā text, the yogi is instructed to imagine the five syllables (HA SA KA LA HRIM) of the deity's mantra in the muladhara chakra. The next set of five syllables (HA SA KA HA LA HRIM) is visualized in the heart chakra and the third cluster (SA KA LA HRIM) in the cakṛa between the eyebrows. The yogi is further instructed to lengthen the enunciation of the M sound at the end of the HRIM syllable, a practice called nada (phonic vibration). This practice goes through various increasingly subtle stages until it dissolves into the silence of the Absolute.[221]

Another common element found in tantric yoga is the use of visionary meditations in which tantrikas focus on a vision or image of the deity (or deities), and in some cases imagine themselves as being the deity and their own body as the body of the deity.[222] The practitioner may use visualizations, identifying with a deity to the degree that the aspirant becomes the Ishta-deva (or meditational deity). In other meditations, the deities are visualized as being inside the tantrika's body. For example, in Abhinavagupta's Tantraloka (chapter 15), the Trika trinity of goddesses (Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā) are visualized on the ends of the three prongs of a trident (located above the head). The rest of the trident is imagined positioned along the central axis of the yogi's body, with the blazing corpse of Shiva visualized in the head.[223]

Mandalas and yantras

Sri Yantra diagram with the Ten Mahavidyas. The triangles represent Shiva and Shakti; the snake represents Spanda and Kundalini.

Yantra are mystical diagrams which are used in tantric meditation and ritual. They are usually associated with specific Hindu deities such as Shiva, Shakti, or Kali. Similarly, a puja may involve focusing on a yantra or mandala associated with a deity.[224]

According to David Gordon White, geometrical mandalas are a key element of Tantra. [225] They are used to represent numerous tantric ideas and concepts as well as used for meditative focus. Mandalas symbolically communicate the correspondences between the "transcendent-yet-immanent" macrocosm and the microcosm of mundane human experience.[225] The godhead (or principal Buddha) is often depicted at the center of the mandala, while all other beings, including the practitioner, are located at various distances from this center.[225] Mandalas also reflected the medieval feudal system, with the king at its centre.[226]

Mandalas and Yantras may be depicted in various ways, on paintings, cloth, in three dimensional form, made out of colored sand or powders, etc. Tantric yoga also often

involves the mental visualization of a mandala or yantra. This is usually combined with mantra recitation and other ritual actions as part of a tantric sadhana (practice).

Sex and eroticism

See also: Tantric sex

While tantra involves a wide range of ideas and practices which are not always of a sexual nature, Flood and Padoux both note that in the West, Tantra is most often thought of as a kind of ritualized sex or a spiritualized yogic sexuality.[227][228][229] According to Padoux, "this is a misunderstanding, for though the place of sex in Tantra is ideologically essential, it is not always so in action and ritual." Padoux further notes that while sexual practices do exist and were used by certain tantric groups, they "lost their prevalence when Tantra spread to other larger social groups." [229]

In the tantric traditions which do use sex as part of spiritual practice (this refers mainly to the Kaulas, and also Tibetan Buddhism), sex and desire are often seen as a means of transcendence that is used to reach the Absolute. Thus, sex and desire are not seen as ends in themselves. Because these practices transgress orthodox Hindu ideas of ritual purity, they have often given tantra a bad image in India, where it is often condemned by the orthodox. According to Padoux, even among the traditions which accept these practices, they are far from prominent and practiced only by a "few initiated and fully qualified adepts".[230]

Western scholarly research

Three-dimensional triangular symbol

The Sri Yantra (shown here in the three-dimensional projection known as Sri Meru or Maha Meru, used primarily by Srividya Shakta sects)

John Woodroffe

The first Western scholar to seriously study Tantra was John Woodroffe (1865–1936), who wrote about Tantra under the pen name Arthur Avalon and is known as the "founding father of Tantric studies".[231] Unlike previous Western scholars Woodroffe advocated for Tantra, defending and presenting it as an ethical and philosophical system in accord with the Vedas and Vedanta.[232] Woodroffe practised Tantra and, while trying to maintain scholastic objectivity, was a student of Hindu Tantra (the Shiva-Shakta tradition).[233][234][235]

Further development

Following Woodroffe, a number of scholars began investigating Tantric teachings, including scholars of comparative religion and Indology such as Agehananda Bharati, Mircea Eliade, Julius Evola, Carl Jung, Alexandra David-Néel, Giuseppe Tucci and Heinrich Zimmer.[236] According to Hugh Urban, Zimmer, Evola and Eliade viewed Tantra as "the culmination of all Indian thought: the most radical form of spirituality and the archaic heart of aboriginal India", regarding it as the ideal religion for the modern era. All three saw Tantra as "the most transgressive and violent path to the sacred".[237]

See also

Dzogchen

Radha Tantra

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Notes

Padoux (2013), p. 2: "The Hindu worship, the pūjā, for instance, is Tantric in its conception and ritual process, the principles of Hindu temple building and iconography are Tantric, and so on."

The dates in the left column of the table are estimates and contested by scholars.

Banerjee (1988): "Tantra is sometimes used to denote governance. Kālidāsa uses the expression prajah tantrayitva (having governed the subjects) in the Abhijñānaśākuntalam (V.5)."

Banerjee (2002), p. 34: "Banabhatta, the Sanskrit author of the 7th century, refers, in the Harshacharita to the propitiation of Matrikas by a tantric ascetic."

Davis (2014), p. 13: "Some agamas argue a monist metaphysics, while others are decidedly dualist. Some claim ritual is the most efficacious means of religious attainment, while others assert that knowledge is more important."

Lewis & deAngelis (2016), pp. 73–77: "The Tantric Buddhist traditions have been given several labels, but there is no single label that is accepted by all of these traditions. [...] It is important to note the use of this term in a plural form. Tantric or esoteric Buddhist traditions are multiple and also originated as multiple, distinct traditions of both text and practice."

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Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

Born 1953 (age 71–72)

London, England

Occupations lecturer, author

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (born 1953, in London) is a Sufi mystic and lineage successor in the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi Order. He is an extensive lecturer and author of several books about Sufism, mysticism, dreamwork and spirituality.

Life and education

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee was born in London in 1953. He began following the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi path at the age of 19, after meeting Irina Tweedie, author of *Daughter of Fire: A Diary of a Spiritual Training with a Sufi Master*. He became Irina Tweedie's successor and a teacher in the Naqshbandiyya Sufi Order.

He initially trained as an English high school teacher and taught for six years, before completing a Ph.D. on Jungian Psychology and Shakespeare.[1] In 1991 he moved to Northern California and founded The Golden Sufi Center to help make available the teachings of this Sufi lineage. He currently lives in California.[2][3][4]

Works

Author of several books, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee has lectured extensively throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe on Sufism, mysticism, Jungian psychology and dreamwork. He has also specialised in the area of dreamwork, integrating the ancient Sufi approach to dreams with the insights of Jungian psychology. Since 2000 the focus of his writing and teaching has been on spiritual responsibility in our present time of transition, and an awakening global consciousness of oneness. More recently he has written about the feminine, the world soul, the anima mundi, and the emerging field of spiritual ecology. He has also hosted a number of Sufi conferences bringing together different Sufi orders in North America.

His initial work from 1990 to 2000, including his first eleven books,[5] was to make the Sufi path more accessible to the Western seeker. The second series of books, starting from the year 2000 with *The Signs of God*, are focused on a spiritual teachings about oneness and how to bring them into contemporary life, with the final book in this series being *Alchemy of Light*. He is editor and contributor to the 2013 anthology *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*[6] (Summer 2013, new edition Fall 2016), which was followed the same year with the publication of his work *Darkening of the Light: Witnessing the End of an Era*. [7] His most recent books are *Seasons of the Sacred: Reconnecting to the Wisdom Within Nature and the Soul*[8] and *Words from the Water's Edge: Mystical Writings of Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee*. [9] In Autumn of 2022 he began a podcast series, "Stories for a Living Future" [10] about the need to reconnect our consciousness to the living Earth, what he terms "a deep ecology of consciousness."

Llewellyn has been featured in two films, *One the Movie* and *Wake Up*. He has also been featured in the television series *Global Spirit* and in August 2012, he was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey as a part of her *Super Soul Sunday* series.[11] A regular contributor to Sufi magazine, *Parabola*, and other periodicals and websites, he also wrote a series of blogs between 2010 and 2017 on the Huffington Post.[12] In Fall 2015, *Parabola* magazine featured a comprehensive interview with Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee on his life and work, *Part of an Ancient Story: A Conversation with Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee*. [13] In 2019 he was interviewed by Bjork for her *Cornucopia Tour Book* [14]

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Angel sigils are mystical symbols, intricate geometric designs representing specific angels (like Archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael) used for invocation, protection, or guidance, acting as keys to access their divine energy, often through meditation, prayer, or placed on altars for focused spiritual work, drawing from ancient grimoires like The Lesser Key of Solomon and The Grimoire of Armadel. They function as visual shortcuts to channel angelic power, with each unique symbol holding the essence of the angel it represents for specific intentions like courage, healing, wisdom, or protection.

What They Are

Seals/Glyphs: Unique coded symbols, often geometric, encapsulating an angel's name or essence.

Invocation Tools: Act as magical keys to call upon an angel's specific powers.

Historical Roots: Found in grimoires (like Armadel, Lesser Key of Solomon) and ancient texts, evolving from medieval magic.

Common Examples & Meanings

Archangel Michael: Protection, courage, strength.

Archangel Gabriel: Wisdom, communication, prophecy, vision.

Archangel Raphael: Healing, guidance.

Archangel Raziel: Psychic abilities, divine secrets, breaking patterns.

Metatron's Cube (or Enoch Sigil): A powerful symbol for concealment or connecting to higher realms.

How to Use Them

Identify Your Need: Determine which angel corresponds to your goal (love, money, healing, etc.).

Find the Sigil: Locate the specific sigil for that angel.

Set Intent: Focus your intention (e.g., "I need courage").

Invoke: Meditate on the sigil, draw it, or place it on an altar while saying prayers or secret words associated with the angel.

Create Connection: The sigil helps focus your mind and energy, making instant contact possible for the angel to hear you.

Types of Angelic Magic

Invocation: Calling angels for help.

Protection: Warding off negative energies or even other angels (Enochian sigils).

Manifestation: Using sigils for love, wealth, understanding, and healing.

The Archangels, their Sigils & Gemstones - Casa Alhambra Crystals

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Sigil

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A sigil (/ˈsɪdʒɪl/) is a type of symbol used in magic. The term usually refers to a pictorial signature of a spirit (such as an angel, demon, or deity).

List of sigils of demons

Magic square

Sigillum Dei

Sigil of Baphomet

what archangels sigils constructed from? /how were they ...

Reddit · r/occult

10+ comments · 3 years ago

Most sigils has been created through magick squares. The Sigils of the Seven Planetary Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Kamael, Raphael, Tzadkiel, ...

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Are angel sigils holy? : r/occult - Reddit

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difference between sigils of the same angel : r/occult ...

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Angelic Sigils, Keys and Calls

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What are angel sigils?

Types of Angel Sigils

How to Make an Angel Sigil

Enochian Sigils | Supernatural Wiki - Fandom

Supernatural Wiki

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An intricate series of sigils 'carved' in the surface of a person's ribcage. With them, humans can hide from literally all angels, including archangels, and ...

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This article is about symbols used in magic. For other uses, see Sigil (disambiguation).

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Goetic seals from the Lesser Key of Solomon

Part of a series on

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A sigil (/ˈsɪdʒɪl/^[1]) is a type of symbol used in magic. The term usually refers to a pictorial signature of a spirit (such as an angel, demon, or deity). In modern usage, especially in the context of chaos magic, a sigil refers to a symbolic representation of the practitioner's desired outcome.

History

72 seals from The Lesser Key of Solomon

The term sigil derives from the Latin sigillum (pl. sigilla), meaning "seal".^[2] In medieval magic, the term sigil was commonly used to refer to occult signs which represented various angels and demons which the practitioner might summon.^[2]

The Lesser Key of Solomon

Further information: List of sigils of demons

Magical training books called grimoires often listed pages of such sigils. A particularly well-known list is in The Lesser Key of Solomon, in which the sigils of the 72 princes of the hierarchy of hell are given for the magician's use. Such sigils are considered by some to be the equivalent of the true name of the spirit and thus granted the magician a measure of control over the beings.^[3]

Methods of construction

A common method of creating the sigils of certain spirits was to use kameas, a special use case of magic squares—the names of the spirits were converted to numbers, which were then located on the magic square. The locations were then connected by lines, forming an abstract figure.^[4]

The word sigil [...] has a long history in Western magic. The members of the Golden Dawn were perfectly familiar with it ("combining the letters, the colours, the attributions and their Synthesis, thou mayest build up a telematic Image of a Force. The Sigil shall then serve thee for the tracing of a Current which shall call into action a certain

Elemental Force") and it was used in the making of talismans. The sigil was like a signature or sign of an occult entity.[5]

Austin Osman Spare

English artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare (1886–1956) developed his own unique method of creating and using sigils, which has had a lasting effect on modern occultism. Spare did not agree with medieval practice of using these, arguing that such supernatural beings were simply complexes in the unconscious, and could be actively created through the process of sigilization.[6][5]

Spare's technique became a cornerstone of chaos magic.[7] It also influenced artist Brion Gysin, who experimented with combining Spare's sigil method with the traditional form of magic squares:

Calligraphic magick squares were one of the techniques most commonly applied by Gysin. He would reduce a name or an idea to a "glyph" and then write across the paper from right to left, turn the paper and do the same again, and so on, turning the paper around and around to create a multidimensional grid... The same techniques and consciously driven functional intention also permeated his paintings. In a very real sense, everything he created was an act of sorcery.[8]

Chaos magic

A modern personal sigil

In chaos magic, following Spare, sigils are commonly created in a well-ordered fashion by writing an intention, then condensing the letters of the statement down to form a monogram. The chaos magician then uses the gnostic state to "launch" or "charge" the sigil—essentially bypassing the conscious mind to implant the desire in the unconscious.[9][7] To quote Ray Sherwin:

The magician acknowledges a desire, he lists the appropriate symbols and arranges them into an easily visualised glyph. Using any of the gnostic techniques he reifies the sigil and then, by force of will, hurls it into his subconscious from where the sigil can begin to work unencumbered by desire.[9]

After charging the sigil, it is considered necessary to repress all memory of it. In the words of Spare, there should be "a deliberate striving to forget it".[6]

In modern chaos magic, when a complex of thoughts, desires, and intentions gains such a level of sophistication that it appears to operate autonomously from the magician's consciousness, as if it were an independent being, then such a complex is referred to as a servitor.[10] When such a being becomes large enough that it exists independently of any one individual, as a form of "group mind", then it is referred to as an egregore.[11] [12]

Later chaos magicians have expanded on the basic sigilization technique. Grant Morrison coined the term hypersigil to refer to an extended work of art with magical meaning and willpower, created using adapted processes of sigilization. Their comic book series *The Invisibles* was intended as such a hypersigil.[7] Morrison has also argued that modern corporate logos like "the McDonald's Golden Arches, the Nike swoosh and the Virgin autograph" are a form of viral sigil:

Corporate sigils are super-breeders. They attack unbranded imaginative space. They invade Red Square, they infest the cranky streets of Tibet, they etch themselves into hairstyles. They breed across clothing, turning people into advertising hoardings... The logo or brand, like any sigil, is a condensation, a compressed, symbolic summoning up of the world of desire which the corporation intends to represent... Walt Disney died long ago but his sigil, that familiar, cartoonish signature, persists, carrying its own vast weight of meanings, associations, nostalgia and significance.[7]

See also

Apotropaic magic – Magic intended to turn away harm or evil influences

Behenian fixed star – Application in medieval astrology

Ceremonial magic – Variety of rituals of magic

Dictionary of Occult, Hermetic and Alchemical Sigils – Occult text of sigils and symbols

Icelandic magical staves – Symbols believed to possess magical properties

Runic magic – Ancient or modern magic performed with runes or runestones

Seal of Solomon – Signet ring attributed to the Israelite king Solomon

Sigil of Baphomet – Sigil of the material world

Sigillum Dei – Seal of God, or Seal of Truth, according to John Dee

Sympathetic magic – Type of magic based on imitation or correspondence

Veve – Religious symbol commonly used in different branches of Vodun

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Runic

ᚱᚷᚢᚦᚱ

Script type Alphabet

PeriodElder Futhark from the 2nd century AD

Direction Left-to-right, boustrophedon

Languages Germanic languages

Related scripts

Parent systems

Egyptian hieroglyphs[1]

Proto-Sinaitic

Phoenician

Greek alphabet

Old Italic

Runic

Child systems Elder Futhark

Younger Futhark

Anglo-Saxon futhorc

ISO 15924

ISO 15924 Runr (211), Runic

Unicode

Unicode alias Runic

Unicode range U+16A0–U+16FF[2]

This article contains phonetic transcriptions in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). For an introductory guide on IPA symbols, see Help:IPA. For the distinction between [], /

/ and (), see IPA § Brackets and transcription delimiters.

This article contains runic characters. Without proper rendering support, you may see question marks, boxes, or other symbols instead of runes.

History of the alphabet

Runes are the letters in a set of related alphabets, known as runic rows, runic alphabets or futharks (also, see futhark vs runic alphabet), native to the Germanic peoples. Runes were primarily used to represent a sound value (a phoneme) but they were also used to represent the concepts after which they are named (ideographic runes). Runology is the academic study of the runic alphabets, runic inscriptions, runestones, and their history. Runology forms a specialised branch of Germanic philology.

The earliest secure runic inscriptions date from at latest AD 150, with a possible earlier inscription dating to AD 50 and Tacitus's possible description of rune use from around AD 98. The Hole Runestone dates from between BC 50 and AD 275. Runes were generally replaced by the Latin alphabet as the cultures that had used runes underwent Christianisation, by approximately AD 700 in central Europe and 1100 in northern Europe. However, the use of runes persisted for specialized purposes beyond this period. Up until the early 20th century, runes were still used in rural Sweden for decorative purposes in Dalarna and on runic calendars.

The three best-known runic alphabets are the Elder Futhark (c. AD 150–800), the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc (400–1100), and the Younger Futhark (800–1100). The Younger Futhark is divided further into the long-branch runes (also called Danish, although they were also used in Norway, Sweden, and Frisia); short-branch, or Rök, runes (also called Swedish–Norwegian, although they were also used in Denmark); and the stavlösa, or Hälsinge, runes (staveless runes). The Younger Futhark developed further into the medieval runes (1100–1500), and the Dalecarlian runes (c. 1500–1800).

The exact development of the early runic alphabet remains unclear but the script ultimately stems from the Phoenician alphabet. Early runes may have developed from the Raetic, Venetic, Etruscan, or Old Latin as candidates. At the time, all of these scripts had the same angular letter shapes suited for epigraphy, which would become characteristic of the runes and related scripts in the region.

The process of transmission of the script is unknown. The oldest clear inscriptions are found in Denmark and northern Germany. A "West Germanic hypothesis" suggests transmission via Elbe Germanic groups, while a "Gothic hypothesis" presumes transmission via East Germanic expansion. Runes continue to be used in a wide variety of ways in modern popular culture.

Name

Etymology

The inscription on the Einang stone (AD 350–400), reading [Ek go]ðagastiz runo faihido

("[I, Go]dguest painted/wrote this runic inscription"),[3] is the earliest Germanic epigraphic attestation of the term.[4]

The name stems from a Proto-Germanic form reconstructed as *rūnō, which may be translated as 'secret, mystery; secret conversation; rune'. It is the source of Gothic rūna (𐍺𐍺𐍺𐍺, 'secret, mystery, counsel'), Old English rūn ('whisper, mystery, secret, rune'), Old Saxon rūna ('secret counsel, confidential talk'), Middle Dutch rūne ('id'), Old High German rūna ('secret, mystery'), and Old Norse rún ('secret, mystery, rune').[5][6] The earliest Germanic epigraphic attestation is the Primitive Norse rūnō (accusative singular), found on the Einang stone (AD 350–400) and the Noleby stone (AD 450).[4]

The term is related to Proto-Celtic *rūna ('secret, magic'), which is attested in Old Irish rún ('mystery, secret'), Middle Welsh rin ('mystery, charm'), Middle Breton rin ('secret wisdom'), and possibly in the ancient Gaulish Cobrunus (< *com-rūnos 'confident'; cf. Middle Welsh cyfrin, Middle Breton queffrin, Middle Irish comrún 'shared secret, confidence') and Sacruna (< *sacro-runa 'sacred secret'), as well as in Lepontic Runatis (< *runo-ātis 'belonging to the secret'). However, it is difficult to tell whether they are cognates (linguistic siblings from a common origin), or if the Proto-Germanic form reflects an early borrowing from Celtic.[7][8] Various connections have been proposed with other Indo-European terms (for example: Sanskrit ráuti रौति 'roar', Latin rŭmor 'noise, rumor'; Ancient Greek eréō πῆω 'ask' and ereunáō πρυνάω 'investigate'),[9] although linguist Ranko Matasović finds them difficult to justify for semantic or linguistic reasons.[7] Because of this, some scholars have speculated that the Germanic and Celtic words may have been a shared religious term borrowed from an unknown non-Indo-European language.[4][7]

Related terms

In early Germanic, a rune could also be referred to as *rūna-stabaz, a compound of *rūnō and *stabaz ('staff; letter'). It is attested in Old Norse rúna-stafr, Old English rún-stæf, and Old High German rún-stab.[10] Other Germanic terms derived from *rūnō include *runōn ('counsellor'), *rūnjan and *ga-rūnjan ('secret, mystery'), *raunō ('trial, inquiry, experiment'), *hugi-rūnō ('secret of the mind, magical rune'), and *halja-rūnō ('witch, sorceress'; literally '[possessor of the] Hel-secret').[11] It is also often part of personal names, including Gothic Runilo (𐍺𐍺𐍺𐍺𐍺), Frankish Rúnfrid, Old Norse Alfrún, Dagrún, Guðrún, Sigrún, Irún, Old English Ælfrún, and Lombardic Goderūna.[9]

The Finnish word runo, meaning 'poem', is an early borrowing from Proto-Germanic,[12] and the source of the term for rune, riimukirjain, meaning 'scratched letter'.[13] The root may also be found in the Baltic languages, where Lithuanian runoti means both 'to cut (with a knife)' and 'to speak'. [14]

The Old English form rún survived into the early modern period as roun, which is now obsolete. The modern English rune is a later formation that is partly derived from Late Latin runa, Old Norse rún, and Danish rune.[6]

History and use

An inscription using cipher runes, the Elder Futhark, and the Younger Futhark, on the 9th-century Rök runestone in Sweden

A Younger Futhark inscription on the 12th-century Vaksala Runestone in Sweden

The runes were in use among the Germanic peoples from the 1st or 2nd century AD.[a] This period corresponds to the late Common Germanic stage linguistically, with a continuum of dialects not yet clearly separated into the three branches of later centuries: North Germanic, West Germanic, and East Germanic.

No distinction is made in surviving runic inscriptions between long and short vowels, although such a distinction was certainly present phonologically in the spoken languages of the time. Similarly, there are no signs for labiovelars in the Elder Futhark (such signs were introduced in both the Anglo-Saxon futhorc and the Gothic alphabet as variants of p; see *peorð*.)

Origins

Main article: Elder Futhark

The formation of the Elder Futhark was complete by the early 5th century, with the Kylver Stone being the first evidence of the futhark ordering as well as of the p rune.

Specifically, the Rhaetic alphabet of Bolzano is often advanced as a candidate for the origin of the runes, with only five Elder Futhark runes (M e, J i, ʁ j, o ŋ, ƿ p) having no counterpart in the Bolzano alphabet.[16] Scandinavian scholars tend to favor derivation from the Latin alphabet itself over Rhaetic candidates.[17][18][19] A "North Etruscan" thesis is supported by the inscription on the Negau helmet B dating to the 2nd century BC.[20] This is in a northern Etruscan alphabet but features a Germanic name, Harigast. Giuliano and Larissa Bonfante suggest that runes derived from some North Italic alphabet, specifically Venetic: But since Romans conquered Veneto after 200 BC, and then the Latin alphabet became prominent and Venetic culture diminished in importance, Germanic people could have adopted the Venetic alphabet within the 3rd century BC or even earlier.[21]

The angular shapes of the runes are shared with most contemporary alphabets of the period that were used for carving in wood or stone. There are no horizontal strokes: when carving a message on a flat staff or stick, it would be along the grain, thus both less legible and more likely to split the wood.[22] This characteristic is also shared by other alphabets, such as the early form of the Latin alphabet used for the Duenos inscription, but it is not universal, especially among early runic inscriptions, which frequently have variant rune shapes, including horizontal strokes. Runic manuscripts (that is written rather than carved runes, such as Codex Runicus) also show horizontal strokes.

The "West Germanic hypothesis" speculates on an introduction by West Germanic

tribes. This hypothesis is based on claiming that the earliest inscriptions of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, found in bogs and graves around Jutland (the Vimose inscriptions), exhibit word endings that, being interpreted by Scandinavian scholars to be Proto-Norse, are considered unresolved and long having been the subject of discussion.[b] In the early Runic period, differences between Germanic languages are generally presumed to be small. Another theory presumes a Northwest Germanic unity preceding the emergence of Proto-Norse proper from roughly the 5th century.[c][d] An alternative suggestion explaining the impossibility of classifying the earliest inscriptions as either North or West Germanic is forwarded by Ë. A. Makaev, who presumes a "special runic koine", an early "literary Germanic" employed by the entire Late Common Germanic linguistic community after the separation of Gothic (2nd to 5th centuries), while the spoken dialects may already have been more diverse.[28]

The Meldorf fibula and Tacitus's Germania

With the potential exception of the Meldorf fibula, a possible runic inscription found in Schleswig-Holstein dating to around 50 AD, the earliest reference to runes (and runic divination) may occur in Roman Senator Tacitus's ethnographic Germania.[29] Dating from around 98 CE, Tacitus describes the Germanic peoples as utilizing a divination practice involving rune-like inscriptions:

For divination and casting lots they have the highest possible regard. Their procedure for casting lots is uniform: They break off the branch of a fruit tree and slice into strips; they mark these by certain signs and throw them, as random chance will have it, on to a white cloth. Then a state priest, if the consultation is a public one, or the father of the family, if it is private, prays to the gods and, gazing to the heavens, picks up three separate strips and reads their meaning from the marks scored on them. If the lots forbid an enterprise, there can be no further consultation about it that day; if they allow it, further confirmation by divination is required.[30]

As Victoria Symons summarizes, "If the inscriptions made on the lots that Tacitus refers to are understood to be letters, rather than other kinds of notations or symbols, then they would necessarily have been runes, since no other writing system was available to Germanic tribes at this time." [29]

Early inscriptions

icon

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Ring of Pietroassa (c. 250–400 AD) by Henri Trenk, 1875

Runic inscriptions from the 400-year period 150–550 AD are described as "Period I". These inscriptions are generally in Elder Futhark, but the set of letter shapes and bindrunes employed is far from standardized. Notably the j, s, and ŋ runes undergo considerable modifications, while others, such as p and ĭ, remain unattested altogether

prior to the first full futhark row on the Kylver Stone (c. 400 AD).

Artifacts such as spear heads or shield mounts have been found that bear runic marking that may be dated to 200 AD, as evidenced by artifacts found across northern Europe in Schleswig (North Germany), Funen, Zealand, Jutland (Denmark), and Scania (Sweden). Earlier—but less reliable—artifacts have been found in Meldorf, Süderdithmarschen (de), in northern Germany; these include brooches and combs found in graves, most notably the Meldorf fibula, and are supposed to have the earliest markings resembling runic inscriptions.

Magical or divinatory use
Main article: Runic magic

Bracteate DR BR42 bearing the inscription Alu

An illustration of the Gummarp Runestone (500–700 AD) from Blekinge, Sweden

Closeup of the runic inscription found on the 6th- or 7th-century Björketorp Runestone located in Blekinge, Sweden

The stanza 157 of Hávamál attribute to runes the power to bring that which is dead back to life. In this stanza, Odin recounts a spell:

Þat kann ek it tolfða,
ef ek sé á tré uppi
váfa virgilná,
svá ek ríst ok í rúnum fák,
at sá gengr gumi
ok mælir við mik.[31]

Translation:

I know a twelfth one
if I see up in a tree,
a dangling corpse in a noose,
I can so carve and colour the runes,
that the man walks
and talks with me.[32]

The earliest runic inscriptions found on artifacts give the name of either the craftsman or the proprietor, or sometimes, remain a linguistic mystery. Due to this, it is possible that the early runes were not used so much as a simple writing system, but rather as magical signs to be used for charms. Although some say the runes were used for divination, there is no direct evidence to suggest they were ever used in this way. The name rune itself, taken to mean "secret, something hidden", seems to indicate that knowledge of the runes was originally considered esoteric, or restricted to an elite.[citation needed] The 6th-century Björketorp Runestone warns in Proto-Norse using the word rune in both

senses:

Haidzruno runu, falahak haidera, ginnarunaz. Arageu haeramalaus uti az. Weladaude, sa'z pat barutz. Uparba spa.

I, master of the runes(?) conceal here runes of power. Incessantly (plagued by) maleficence, (doomed to) insidious death (is) he who breaks this (monument). I prophesy destruction / prophecy of destruction.[33]

—Björketorp Runestone

The same curse and use of the word, rune, is also found on the Stentofte Runestone. There also are some inscriptions suggesting a medieval belief in the magical significance of runes, such as the Franks Casket (AD 700) panel.

Charm words, such as *auja*, *lapu*, *laukaŕ*, and most commonly, *alu*,^[34] appear on a number of Migration period Elder Futhark inscriptions as well as variants and abbreviations of them. Much speculation and study has been produced on the potential meaning of these inscriptions. Rhyming groups appear on some early bracteates that also may be magical in purpose, such as *salusalu* and *luwatuwa*. Further, an inscription on the Gummarp Runestone (500–700 AD) gives a cryptic inscription describing the use of three runic letters followed by the Elder Futhark *f*-rune written three times in succession.^[35]

Nevertheless, it has proven difficult to find unambiguous traces of runic "oracles": although Norse literature is full of references to runes, it nowhere contains specific instructions on divination. There are at least three sources on divination with rather vague descriptions that may, or may not, refer to runes: Tacitus's 1st-century *Germania*, Snorri Sturluson's 13th-century *Ynglinga saga*, and Rimbert's 9th-century *Vita Ansgari*.

The first source, Tacitus's *Germania*,^[36] describes "signs" chosen in groups of three and cut from "a nut-bearing tree", although the runes do not seem to have been in use at the time of Tacitus' writings. A second source is the *Ynglinga saga*, where Granmar, the king of Södermanland, goes to Uppsala for the *blót*. There, the "chips" fell in a way that said that he would not live long (*Féll honum þá svo spánn sem hann mundi eigi lengi lifa*). These "chips", however, are easily explainable as a *blótspánn* (sacrificial chip), which was "marked, possibly with sacrificial blood, shaken, and thrown down like dice, and their positive or negative significance then decided."^[37]^[page needed]

The third source is Rimbert's *Vita Ansgari*, where there are three accounts of what some believe to be the use of runes for divination, but Rimbert calls it "drawing lots". One of these accounts is the description of how a renegade Swedish king, Anund Uppsale, first brings a Danish fleet to Birka, but then changes his mind and asks the Danes to "draw lots". According to the story, this "drawing of lots" was quite informative, telling them that attacking Birka would bring bad luck and that they should attack a Slavic town instead. The tool in the "drawing of lots", however, is easily explainable as a *hlautlein* (lot-twig),

which according to Foote and Wilson[38] would be used in the same manner as a blótsþánn.

The lack of extensive knowledge on historical use of the runes has not stopped modern authors from extrapolating entire systems of divination from what few specifics exist, usually loosely based on the reconstructed names of the runes and additional outside influence.

Medieval use

Codex Runicus, a vellum manuscript from approximately 1300 AD containing one of the oldest and best preserved texts of the Scanian Law, is written entirely in runes.

icon

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(March 2017) (Learn how and when to remove this message)

As Proto-Germanic evolved into its later language groups, the words assigned to the runes and the sounds represented by the runes themselves began to diverge somewhat and each culture would create new runes, rename or rearrange its rune names slightly, or stop using obsolete runes completely, to accommodate these changes. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon futhorc has several runes peculiar to itself to represent diphthongs unique to (or at least prevalent in) Old English.

Some later runic finds are on monuments (runestones), which often contain solemn inscriptions about people who died or performed great deeds. For a long time it was presumed that this kind of grand inscription was the primary use of runes, and that their use was associated with a certain societal class of rune carvers.

In the mid-1950s, however, approximately 670 inscriptions, known as the Bryggen inscriptions, were found in Bergen.[39] These inscriptions were made on wood and bone, often in the shape of sticks of various sizes, and contained information of an everyday nature—ranging from name tags, prayers (often in Latin), personal messages, business letters, and expressions of affection, to bawdy phrases of a profane and sometimes even of a vulgar nature. Following this find, it is nowadays commonly presumed that, at least in late use, Runic was a widespread and common writing system.

17th-century clog almanac collected by Sir Hans Sloane, now in the collection of the British Museum

In the later Middle Ages, runes also were used in the clog almanacs (sometimes called Runic staff, Prim, or Scandinavian calendar) of Sweden and Estonia. The authenticity of some monuments bearing Runic inscriptions found in Northern America is disputed; most of them have been dated to modern times.

Runes in Eddic poetry

In Norse mythology, the runic alphabet is attested to a divine origin (Old Norse: reginkunnr). This is attested as early as on the Noleby Runestone from c. 600 AD that reads Runo fahi raginakundo toj[e'k]a..., meaning "I prepare the suitable divine rune..."[40] and in an attestation from the 9th century on the Sparlösa Runestone, which reads Ok rað runar þar rægi[n]kundu, meaning "And interpret the runes of divine origin".[41] In the Poetic Edda poem Hávamál, Stanza 80, the runes also are described as reginkunnr:

Þat er þá reynt,
er þú at rúnum spyrr
inum reginkunnum,
þeim er gerðu ginnregin
ok fáði fimbulpulr,
þá hefir hann bazt, ef hann þegir.[31]

Translation:

That is now proved,
what you asked of the runes,
of the potent famous ones,
which the great gods made,
and the mighty sage stained,
that it is best for him if he stays silent.[42]

The poem Hávamál explains that the originator of the runes was the major deity, Odin. Stanza 138 describes how Odin received the runes through self-sacrifice:

Veit ek at ek hekk vindga meiði a
netr allar nío,
geiri vndaþr ok gefinn Oðni,
sialfr sialfom mer,
a þeim meiði, er mangi veit, hvers hann af rótom renn.

Translation:

I know that I hung on a windy tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree of which no man knows from where its roots run.[43]

In stanza 139, Odin continues:

Við hleifi mik seldo ne vþ hornigi,
nysta ek niþr,
nam ek vp rvnar,

opandi nam,
fell ek aptr þaðan.

Translation:

No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn,
downwards I peered;
I took up the runes,
screaming I took them,
then I fell back from there.[43]

In the Poetic Edda poem Rígpula another origin is related of how the runic alphabet became known to humans. The poem relates how Ríg, identified as Heimdall in the introduction, sired three sons—Thrall (slave), Churl (freeman), and Jarl (noble)—by human women. These sons became the ancestors of the three classes of humans indicated by their names. When Jarl reached an age when he began to handle weapons and show other signs of nobility, Ríg returned and, having claimed him as a son, taught him the runes. In 1555, the exiled Swedish archbishop Olaus Magnus recorded a tradition that a man named Kettill Runskel had stolen three rune staves from Odin and learned the runes and their magic.

Futharks

"Futhark" redirects here. For the programming language, see Futhark (programming language).

Futhark is a collective term in runology used to describe all runic rows which follows the Germanic alphabetical order of F, U, Þ, A, R, K.. etc (compare § Runic alphabets). In English, it is also common to call each futhark after its regional composition, since the original A-rune and K-rune shifted regionally through time: "Futhark" (𐍂𐍅𐍆𐍅𐍆𐍂) can specify the Elder runic row, "Futhorc" (𐍂𐍅𐍆𐍃𐍂𐍅) can specify the Anglo-Frisian runic row, and "Futhork" (𐍂𐍅𐍆𐍃𐍂𐍅) can specify the Younger runic row. The younger can further be divided into "Futhark" and "Futhork" based on the early and late transliteration of the younger Óss-rune (𐍅).

Elder Futhark (2nd to 8th centuries)

Main article: Elder Futhark

Detail of the Elder Futhark inscription on a replica of one of the 5th-century AD Golden Horns of Gallehus found on Jutland, now Denmark

The Elder Futhark, used for writing Proto-Norse, consists of 24 runes that often are arranged in three groups of eight; each group is referred to as an ætt (Old Norse, meaning 'clan, group'). The earliest known sequential listing of the full set of 24 runes dates to approximately AD 400 and is found on the Kylver Stone in Gotland, Sweden.

Each rune most likely had a name which was chosen to represent the sound of the rune itself. The names are, however, not directly attested for the Elder Futhark themselves. Germanic philologists reconstruct names in Proto-Germanic based on the names given

for the runes in the later alphabets attested in the rune poems and the linked names of the letters of the Gothic alphabet. For example, the letter /a/ was named from the runic letter called Ansuz. An asterisk before the rune names means that they are unattested reconstructions. The 24 Elder Futhark runes are the following:[44]

Rune	UCS	Trans.	IPA	Proto-Germanic name	Meaning
f	ƿ	f	/f/	*fehu "chattel, wealth"	
u	ᚢ	u	/u(:)/	*ūruz "aurochs", Wild ox (or *ūram "water/slag"?)	
th,p	þ	þ	/θ/, /ð/	*þurisaz "Thurs" (see Jötunn) or *þunraz ("the god Thunraz")	
a	ᚦ	a	/a(:)/	*ansuz "god"	
r	ᚷ	r	/r/	*raidō "ride, journey"	
k	ᚥ	k (c)	/k/	*kaunan "ulcer"? (or *kenaz "torch"?)	
g	ᚱ	g	/g/	*gebō "gift"	
w	ᚦ	w	/w/	*wunjō "joy"	
h h	ᚨ ᚩ	h	/h/	*hagalaz "hail" (the precipitation)	
n	ᚱ	n	/n/	*naudiz "need"	
i	ᚲ	i	/i(:)/	*īsaz "ice"	
j	ᚷ	j	/j/	*jēra- "year, good year, harvest"	
ī,ei	ᚯ	ī (æ)	*/æ:/[45]	*ī(h)waz "yew-tree"	
p	ᚥ	p	/p/	*perþ- meaning unknown; possibly "pear-tree".	
z	ᚹ	z	/z/	*algiz "elk" (or "protection, defence"[46])	
s s	ᚱ ᚷ	s	/s/	*sōwilō "sun"	
t	ᚦ	t	/t/	*tīwaz "the god Tiwaz"	
b	ᚷ	b	/b/	*berkanan "birch"	
e	ᚦ	e	/e(:)/	*ehwaz "horse"	
m	ᚱ	m	/m/	*mannaz "man"	
l	ᚲ	l	/l/	*laguz "water, lake" (or possibly *laukaz "leek")	
ŋ ŋ	ᚷ	ŋ	/ŋ/	*ingwaz "the god Ingwaz"	
d	ᚱ	d	/d/	*dagaz "day"	
o	ᚯ	o	/o(:)/	*ōpila-/*ōpala- "heritage, estate, possession"	

Anglo-Saxon runes (5th to 11th centuries)

Main article: Anglo-Saxon runes

The Anglo-Saxon Futhorc

The Anglo-Saxon runes, also known as the futhorc (sometimes written futhorc), are an extended alphabet, consisting of 29, and later 33, characters. It was probably used from the 5th century onwards. There are competing theories as to the origins of the Anglo-Saxon (also called Anglo-Frisian) Futhorc. One theory proposes that it was developed in Frisia and later spread to England,[citation needed] while another holds that Scandinavians introduced runes to England, where the futhorc was modified and exported to Frisia.[citation needed] Some examples of futhorc inscriptions are found on the Thames scramasax, in the Vienna Codex, in Cotton Otho B.x (Anglo-Saxon rune poem) and on the Ruthwell Cross.

The Anglo-Saxon rune poem gives the following characters and names: ƿ feoh, ƿ ur, ƿ þorn, ƿ os, ƿ rad, ƿ cen, ƿ gyfu, ƿ pynn, ƿ hægl, ƿ nyd, ƿ is, ƿ ger, ƿ eoh, ƿ peorð, ƿ eolh, ƿ sigel, ƿ tir, ƿ beorc, ƿ eh, ƿ mann, ƿ lagu, ƿ ing, ƿ æthel, ƿ dæg, ƿ ac, ƿ æsc, ƿ yr, ƿ ior, ƿ ear.

Extra runes attested to outside of the rune poem include ƿ cweorð, ƿ calc, ƿ gar, and ƿ stan. Some of these additional letters have only been found in manuscripts. Feoh, þorn, and sigel stood for [f], [θ], and [s] in most environments, but voiced to [v], [ð], and [z] between vowels or voiced consonants. Gyfu and wynn stood for the letters yogh and wynn, which became [g] and [w] in Middle English.

"Marcomannic runes" (8th to 9th centuries)

Marcomannic runes

A runic alphabet consisting of a mixture of Elder Futhark with Anglo-Saxon futhorc is recorded in a treatise called *De Inventione Litterarum*, ascribed to Hrabanus Maurus and preserved in 8th- and 9th-century manuscripts mainly from the southern part of the Carolingian Empire (Alemannia, Bavaria). The manuscript text attributes the runes to the Marcomanni, quos nos Nordmannos vocamus, and hence traditionally, the alphabet is called "Marcomannic runes", but it has no connection with the Marcomanni, and rather is an attempt by Carolingian scholars to represent all letters of the Latin alphabets with runic equivalents.

Wilhelm Grimm discussed these runes in 1821.[47]

Younger Futhark (8th to 11th centuries)

Main article: Younger Futhark

The Younger Futhark: long-branch runes and short-twig runes

The Younger Futhark, also called Scandinavian Futhark, is a reduced form of the Elder Futhark, consisting of only 16 characters. The reduction correlates with phonetic changes when Proto-Norse evolved into Old Norse. They are found in Scandinavia and Viking Age settlements abroad, probably in use from the 8th century onward. They are divided into long-branch (Danish) and short-twig (Swedish and Norwegian) runes. The difference between the two versions is a matter of controversy. A general opinion is that the difference between them was functional (viz., the long-branch runes were used for documentation on stone, whereas the short-twig runes were in everyday use for private or official messages on wood).

While also featuring a runic inscription detailing the erection of a bridge for a loved one, the 11th-century Ramsung carving is a Sigurd stone that depicts the legend of Sigurd.

Runic alphabets

"Runic alphabet" redirects here. For runic alphabets following the futhark order, see § Futhark.

The term Runic alphabet is sometimes used in runology to describe runic rows following the Latin alphabetical order of A, B, C, D, etc. (compare § Futhark).

Medieval runes (12th to 15th centuries)

Main article: Medieval runes

Medieval runes

The Saleby church bell (sv), Västergötland, Sweden, including a runic inscription from 1228 AD

In the Middle Ages, the Younger Futhark in Scandinavia was expanded, so that it once more contained one sign for each phoneme of the Old Norse language. Dotted variants of voiceless signs were introduced to denote the corresponding voiced consonants, or vice versa, voiceless variants of voiced consonants, and several new runes also appeared for vowel sounds. Inscriptions in medieval Scandinavian runes show a large number of variant rune forms, and some letters, such as s, c, and z often were used interchangeably.[48][49]

Medieval runes were in use until the 15th century. Of the total number of Norwegian runic inscriptions preserved today, most are medieval runes. Notably, more than 600 inscriptions using these runes have been discovered in Bergen since the 1950s, mostly on wooden sticks (the so-called Bryggen inscriptions). This indicates that runes were in common use side by side with the Latin alphabet for several centuries. Indeed, some of the medieval runic inscriptions are written in Latin.

Dalecarlian runes (16th to 19th centuries)

Main article: Dalecarlian runes

Dalecarlian runes

According to Carl-Gustav Werner, "In the isolated province of Dalarna in Sweden a mix of runes and Latin letters developed." [50] The Dalecarlian runes came into use in the early 16th century and remained in some use up to the 20th century.[51] Some discussion remains on whether their use was an unbroken tradition throughout this period or whether people in the 19th and 20th centuries learned runes from books written on the subject. The character inventory was used mainly for transcribing Swedish in areas where Elfdalian was predominant.

The Dalecarlian runes attracted interest of Johannes Bureus and his exploration of them was one of the first ground stones of the science which later became known as runology, despite the fact that Bureus saw runes equal to Hebrew as a sacred alphabet having magical force.

Other Swedish post-Reformation runes

Runes in Sweden in the 19th century were also used in areas on its northern coast, such as in Medelpad, Hassela and Haverö, but they were very different from those used

in Dalarna.

Similarly to Norway, runes were sometimes used in magic books in Sweden.[52]

Norwegian post-Reformation runes

Some examples of Norwegian post-reformation runes according to James Knirk (nb), Eilert Støren and Jonas Nordby.

Approximately two hundred runic inscriptions made by Norwegian farmers in 17th-20th centuries across the whole of Norway are attested, but origins of this runic tradition are uncertain. During the 15th and 16th centuries runes were known to many farmers in Gotland and Iceland, and to educated people in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, like Bent Bille, Jacob de la Gardie, Ole Worm, Arild Huitfeldt and Mogens Gyldenstierne. But the runes, which were used by Norwegian farmers, are attested only from the 17th century, mainly in Hardanger, Telemark and south-western Trøndelag. These runes were used for personal names and Roman numerals on different objects, sometimes in combination with rosemåling, and also used in magic books, on musical instruments, and on gravestones.[53][54][55]

This runic tradition seems to be of newer origin, and brought to the farmers by priests (like Gert Miltzow, Peder Alfssøn (nb) and Hans Jacob Wille (nb)) and other educated people, since there is no good evidence of the use of runes in Norway by farmers in the 15th and 16th centuries, with very few inscriptions perhaps dating from the 16th century. [53]

Differences from Roman script

While Roman script would ultimately replace runes in most contexts, it differed significantly from runic script. For example, on the differences between the use of Anglo-Saxon runes and the Latin script that would come to replace them, runologist Victoria Symons says:

As well as being distinguished from the roman alphabet in visual appearance and letter order, the futhorc is further set apart by the fact that, unlike their roman counterparts, runic letters are often associated not only with sound values but also with names. These names are often nouns and, in almost all instances, they begin with the sound value represented by the associated letter. ... The fact that each rune represents [both] a sound value and a word gives this writing system a multivalent quality that further distinguishes it from roman script. A roman letter simply represents its sound value. When used, for example, for the purpose of pagination, such letters can assume added significance, but this is localised to the context of an individual manuscript. Runic letters, on the other hand, are inherently multivalent; they can, and often do, represent several different kinds of information simultaneously. This aspect of runic letters is one that is frequently employed and exploited by writers and scribes who include them in their manuscripts.[56]

Ideographic runes

Main article: Ideographic rune

The Younger Futhark inscription Ög43 with the Elder Futhark rune 𐌛 (early Old Norse: *dagǫ, "day") used as an ideographic rune for the writers name.

In addition to their historic use as letters, runes were also used to represent their names as ideographs. Such instances are sometimes referred to by way of the modern German loanword *Begriffsrunen*, meaning 'concept-runes' (singular *Begriffsrunen*), but the descriptive term "ideographic runes" is also used.[57]

Such were used throughout the 1st millennium and into the Medieval Period, utilized by both Norse and Anglo-Saxon runic writers.

Runology

Main article: Runology

The modern study of runes was initiated during the Renaissance, by Johannes Bureus (1568–1652). Bureus viewed runes as holy or magical in a kabbalistic sense.[58] The study of runes was continued by Olof Rudbeck Sr (1630–1702) and presented in his collection *Atlantica*. Anders Celsius (1701–1744) further extended the science of runes and travelled around the whole of Sweden to examine the runstenar. From the "golden age of philology" in the 19th century, runology formed a specialized branch of Germanic linguistics.

Body of inscriptions

Main article: Runic inscriptions

The Vimose Comb from the island of Funen, Denmark, features the earliest known runic inscription (AD 150 to 200) and simply reads, 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌰𐌿𐌹 "Harja", a male name.[59]

The largest group of surviving Runic inscription are Viking Age Younger Futhark runestones, commonly found in Denmark and Sweden.[60] Another large group are medieval runes, most commonly found on small objects, often wooden sticks. The largest concentration of runic inscriptions are the Bryggen inscriptions found in Bergen, more than 650 in total. Elder Futhark inscriptions number around 350, about 260 of which are from Scandinavia, of which about half are on bracteates. Anglo-Saxon futhorc inscriptions number around 100 items.

Modern use

Main article: Modern runic writing

Runic alphabets have seen numerous uses since the 18th-century Viking revival, in Scandinavian Romantic nationalism (Gothicismus) and Germanic occultism in the 19th century, and in the context of the Fantasy genre and of modern Germanic paganism in the 20th century.[citation needed]

Esotericism

Germanic mysticism and Nazi Germany

Further information: Armanen runes, Wiligut runes, and Runengymnastik

Runic script on an 1886 gravestone in Parkend, England

From 1933, the Schutzstaffel unit insignia comprised two sig runes, which derive from the Armanen Futhark, invented in the 19th century by völkisch author Guido von List. The pioneer of the Armanist branch of Ariosophy and one of the more important figures in esotericism in Germany and Austria in the late 19th and early 20th century was the Austrian occultist, mysticist, and völkisch author, Guido von List. In 1908, he published in *Das Geheimnis der Runen* ("The Secret of the Runes") a set of eighteen so-called, "Armanen runes", based on the Younger Futhark and runes of List's own introduction, which allegedly were revealed to him in a state of temporary blindness after cataract operations on both eyes in 1902. The use of runes in Germanic mysticism, notably List's "Armanen runes" and the derived "Wiligut runes" by Karl Maria Wiligut, played a certain role in Nazi symbolism. The fascination with runic symbolism was mostly limited to Heinrich Himmler, and not shared by the other members of the Nazi top echelon. Consequently, runes appear mostly in insignia associated with the Schutzstaffel ("SS"), the paramilitary organization led by Himmler. Wiligut is credited with designing the SS-Ehrenring, which displays a number of "Wiligut runes".[citation needed]

Modern paganism and esotericism

Runes are popular in New Age esotericism, modern Germanic paganism, and to a lesser extent in other forms of modern paganism. Various systems of Runic divination have been published since the 1980s, notably by Ralph Blum (1982), Stephen Flowers (1984, onward), Stephan Grundy (1990), and Nigel Pennick (1995).[citation needed]

The Uthark theory originally was proposed as a scholarly hypothesis by Sigurd Agrell in 1932. In 2002, Swedish esotericist Thomas Karlsson popularized this "Uthark" runic row, which he refers to as, the "night side of the runes", in the context of modern occultism. [citation needed]

Bluetooth

Bluetooth logo with the initials of Harald Bluetooth

The Bluetooth logo is a bind rune (a ligature) of two runes of the Younger Futhark, *hagall and ʀ bjarkan, equivalent to the letters H and B, that are the initials of Harald Bluetooth, who was a king of Denmark from the Viking Age.[61]

Fantasy literature

See also: Cirth § Runes from *The Hobbit*

Runes play an important role in the horror story "Casting the Runes," by the academic Medievalist and ghost story author M. R. James, first published in his 1911 collection "More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary." In J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit* (1937), the Anglo-Saxon runes are used on a map and on the title page to emphasize its connection to the Dwarves. They also were used in the initial drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*, but

later were replaced by the Cirth rune-like alphabet invented by Tolkien, used to write the language of the Dwarves, Khuzdul. Following Tolkien, historical and fictional runes appear commonly in modern popular culture, particularly in fantasy literature, like in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter, where Runes is a subject taught at Hogwarts, also in the 7th book Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Dumbledore gave Hermione a children's book called The Tales of Beedle the Bard which is written in runes.[citation needed]

Video, board and role-playing games

Runes feature extensively in many video games that incorporate themes from early Germanic cultures, including Ultima (series), Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, Jøtun, Northgard and God of War. They are used for a range of purposes including puzzles, names, symbols, decoration and on runestones that provide information about Nordic mythology and background for the game's narrative.[62][63][64]

The 1992 video game Heimdall used runes as "magical symbols" associated with unnatural forces. Role-playing games, such as the Ultima series, use a runic font for in-game signs and printed maps and booklets, and Metagaming's The Fantasy Trip used rune-based cipher for clues and jokes throughout its publications.[citation needed]

Unicode

Main article: Runic (Unicode block)

Runic steel stamps, Elder Futhark

Runic alphabets were added to the Unicode Standard in September, 1999 with the release of version 3.0.

The Unicode block for Runic alphabets is U+16A0–U+16FF. It is intended to encode the letters of the Elder Futhark, the Anglo-Frisian runes, and the Younger Futhark long-branch and short-twigg (but not the staveless) variants, in cases where cognate letters have the same shape resorting to "unification".

The block as of Unicode 3.0 contained 81 symbols: 75 runic letters (U+16A0–U+16EA), 3 punctuation marks (Runic Single Punctuation U+16EB ·, Runic Multiple Punctuation U+16EC : and Runic Cross Punctuation U+16ED *), and three runic symbols that are used in early modern runic calendar staves ("Golden number Runes", Runic Arlaug Symbol U+16EE †, Runic Tvimadur Symbol U+16EF ‡, Runic Belgthor Symbol U+16F0 Φ). As of Unicode 7.0 (2014), eight characters were added, three representing J. R. R. Tolkien's mode of writing Modern English in Anglo-Saxon runes, and five for the "cryptogrammic" vowel symbols used in an inscription on the Franks Casket.

Runic[1][2]

Official Unicode Consortium code chart (PDF)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	A	B
C	D	E	F								
U+16Ax	ƿ	ƿ	ŋ		ŋ	ŋ	þ	þ	ƒ	ƒ	

	ᚦ	ᚧ	ᚨ	ᚩ							
U+16Bx	ᚪ	ᚫ	ᚬ	ᚭ	ᚰ	ᚱ	ᚲ	ᚴ	ᚵ	ᚷ	ᚸ
ᚹ	ᚺ	ᚻ	ᚼ	ᚽ							
U+16Cx	ᚾ	ᚿ	ᛀ	ᛁ		ᛄ	ᛅ	ᛇ	ᛈ	ᛉ	ᛊ
ᛋ	ᛌ	ᛍ	ᛎ	ᛏ							
U+16Dx	ᛒ	ᛓ	ᛔ	ᛕ	ᛗ	ᛙ	ᛛ	ᛝ	ᛞ	ᛟ	ᛠ
ᛡ	ᛢ		ᛥ	ᛦ							
U+16Ex			ᛨ	ᛩ	᛭	ᛯ	ᛱ	ᛳ	ᛵ	ᛷ	ᚹ
ᚺ	ᚻ	ᚼ	ᚽ	ᚾ							
U+16Fx	ᚿ	ᛀ	ᛁ	ᛂ	ᛃ	ᛄ	ᛅ	ᛆ	ᛇ	ᛈ	ᛉ

Notes

1.^ As of Unicode version 17.0

2.^ Grey areas indicate non-assigned code points

See also

Codex Runicus

List of runestones

Gothic runic inscriptions

Sweden's rune inscriptions

Sigurd stones

Pentadic numerals – Notation for presenting numbers

Rundata

Rune poem

Runic magic – Ancient or modern magic performed with runes or runestones

Runiform

Runology

Letter symbolism

Runology works

Bautil

Runa ABC

Similar scripts to runes

Old Italic script

Old Turkic script

Footnotes

The oldest known runic inscription dates to around AD 150 and is found on a comb discovered in the bog of Vimose, Funen, Denmark.[15] The inscription reads harja; a disputed candidate for a 1st-century inscription is on the Meldorf fibula in southern Jutland.

Inscriptions such as wagnija, niþijo, and harija are supposed to represent tribe names, tentatively proposed to be Vangiones, the Nidensis, and the Harii tribes located in the Rhineland.[23] Since names ending in -io reflect Germanic morphology representing the Latin ending -ius, and the suffix -inius was reflected by Germanic -inio-, [24][25] the question of the problematic ending -ijo in masculine Proto-Norse would be resolved by assuming Roman (Rhineland) influences, while "the awkward ending -a of lagupewa[26] may be solved by accepting the fact that the name may indeed be West Germanic".[23]

Penzl & Hall 1994a assume a period of "Proto-Nordic-Westgermanic" unity down to the 5th century and the Gallehus horns inscription.[27]

The division between Northwest Germanic and Proto-Norse is somewhat arbitrary.[28]

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Scratching runes was not much different from spraying tags, Frisia Coast Trail (2023) vte

Runes

RunologyList of runologistsRundata

Germanic Elder Futhark

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(ca. AD to 9th c.)

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Icelandic magical staves

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Icelandic magical staves (Icelandic: galdrastafir, roughly "incantation staves", lit. 'galdur staves') are sigils that were credited with supposed magical effect preserved in various Icelandic grimoires, such as the Galdrabók, dating from the 17th century and later.[1]

Table of magical staves

Icelandic name	Manuscript description	Image
Að fá stúlku	"To get a girl", this magical stave is used by a man in love to gain the affections of the object of his desires.[2]	
Ægishjálmur	Helm of Awe (or Helm of Terror); to induce fear, protect the warrior, and prevail in battle.[2]	
Angurgapi	Carved on the ends of barrels to prevent leaking.[citation needed]	
Brýnslustafir	For use on whetstones.[3]	
Draumstafir	To dream of unfulfilled desires.[3]	
Dreprún	To kill an enemy's cattle.[4]	
Feingur	A fertility symbol.[3]	
Gapaldur	Two staves, kept in the shoes, gapaldur under the heel of the right foot and ginfaxi under the toes of the left foot, to magically ensure victory in bouts of Icelandic wrestling (glíma).[2]	
Ginfaxi		
Hólastafir	To open hills.[2]	
Kaupaloki	To prosper in trade and business.[2]	
Lásabryjótur	To open a lock without a key.	
Lukkustafir	Whoever carries this symbol with them encounters no evil, neither on the sea nor on the land.[5]	
Máladeilan	To win in court.[6]	
Nábrókarstafir	A stave used when making necropants (nábrók), a pair of trousers made from the skin of a dead man that are capable of producing an endless supply of money.[7]	
Skelkunarstafir	To make your enemies afraid.[8] (A similar looking stave is titled Óttastafir in the Huld Manuscript.)	
Rosahringur minni	A lesser circle of protection.[2]	
Smjörhnútur	Butterknot, to find out if butter was made using milk stolen by a Tilberi.[9]	
Stafir gegn galdri	Staves against witchcraft.[10]	
Stafir til að vekja upp draug	To raise the dead and drive away evil spirits.[2]	
Þjófastafir	For use against thieves.[11]	
Tóustefna	To ward off foxes.[12]	
Varnarstafir	Valdemars Valdemar's Protection Stave; increases favor and happiness.	
Vatnahlífir	Protection against drowning.	
Vegvísir	To guide people through rough weather.[3]	
Veiðistafir	For luck in fishing.	
See also		
Galdr		

Hex sign

Runic magic

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Eggertson

"Butterknot - Tilberi ~ Museum of Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft". galdrasyning.is.

From a 17th-century manuscript, lbs 143 8vo, in the National Library in Reykjavík.

From a 17th-century medical text, am 434a 12mo, in the Arnemaganean Collection in Reykjavík.

From a 19th-century manuscript, lbs 4375 8vo, in the National Library in Reykjavík.

External links

Media related to Icelandic magical staves at Wikimedia Commons

Hrafnhildur Inga Guðjónsdóttir. 2024. "On Icelandic Occult Symbols Today". Hyldyr.

List of the staves at the Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft

Galdrastafir: Icelandic Magical Staves

vte

Superstition

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Seasonal Holidays 2025

EEG or BCI meditation tools for spirit contact

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AI Overview

My Brain on Muse, the Tech Meditation Headset — The Revealer

EEG/BCI meditation tools like Muse and OpenBCI headsets use sensors to read brainwaves (EEG) and provide neurofeedback (audio cues) to guide users into focused or relaxed states, enhancing meditation, focus training, and self-awareness, which indirectly supports spiritual practices by refining mental control, though direct "spirit contact" is beyond their scope, focusing on internal brain states instead. Popular options include Muse for guided experiences and OpenBCI for DIY exploration, helping you achieve deeper states like alpha/theta waves linked to meditation, but they measure brain activity, not external entities.

Popular EEG/BCI Tools for Meditation

Muse (Muse 2, Muse S): Headbands that use EEG sensors to convert brain activity into calming or alerting sounds (nature, ambient music) via headphones, training focus and relaxation for mindfulness.

NeuroSky MindWave Mobile 2: A single-sensor headset that powers brainwave-controlled games and wellness apps, tracking focus for learning and mood.

OpenBCI: A more advanced, open-source platform with various EEG headsets (like the Headband Kit) allowing detailed frontal, temporal, and parietal brainwave measurement for deeper research or custom projects.

How They Work for Meditation

Neurofeedback: Devices read EEG signals (voltage changes on the scalp) and provide real-time auditory feedback.

Brainwave States: They help you recognize and cultivate brainwave patterns associated with deep focus (Alpha, Theta waves) and relaxation, beneficial for mindfulness and spiritual practices.

Training: You learn to mentally control the feedback (e.g., quiet sounds for focus, nature sounds for calm), training your brain to enter desired states more easily.

Regarding "Spirit Contact"

These tools are scientifically grounded in measuring your brain's electrical activity, not communicating with external spiritual entities.

They help achieve profound internal states, which many spiritual traditions link to higher awareness, but the "contact" is interpreted as enhanced self-awareness and mental control rather than external communication.

Who Should Use Them?

Beginners: Muse provides guided, user-friendly experiences for basic meditation.

Enthusiasts/Researchers: OpenBCI offers deep customization for exploring brain states.

Anyone: Seeking to improve focus, reduce stress, and gain objective insight into their meditation practice.

My Brain on Muse, the Tech Meditation Headset — The Revealer

May 9, 2022 — The Muse S consists of: * A soft headband * A small puck containing the device's brains * EEG sensors that measure volt...

The Revealer

Muse (headband) - Wikipedia

Muse is a brain activity sensing headband. The device measures brain activity via 4 electroencephalography (EEG) sensors. An accom...

Wikipedia

OpenBCI EEG Headband Kit

Jul 18, 2025 — Technical Information. The EEG headband kit includes a clip to secure an OpenBCI board case onto the headband strap. T...

OpenBCI Shop

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My Brain on Muse, the Tech Meditation Headset

The Revealer

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May 10, 2022 — “Muse has four channels of EEG electrodes: two in your forehead and two behind the ears. It tracks your brain activity during meditation, and ...

Muse® EEG Mental Fitness & Sleep Headband

Muse: the brain sensing headband

<https://choosemuse.com>

It offers essential EEG neurofeedback for focus and relaxation training, guided meditations, real-time biofeedback, and progress tracking,

How It Works

Learn More

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App

Missing: spirit | Show results with: spirit

Mindfulness Improves Brain–Computer Interface ...

National Institutes of Health (.gov)

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov> › articles › PMC7727383

by JR Stieger · 2020 · Cited by 73 — We show that MBAT allows participants to learn to volitionally increase alpha band neural activity during BCI tasks that incorporate intentional rest.

Missing: spirit | Show results with: spirit
NeuroSky Store: EEG Headsets

NeuroSky

<https://store.neurosky.com>

Feel your best with focused meditation and mood tracking apps. quantify spiritual growth
solution for conducting EEG-oriented research.

MindWave

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EEG Sound Bath System for Promoting Peace and ...

Facebook · Sound Bath Practitioners World Wide

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My doctoral research develops a Brain-Computer Music Interface for Meditation where
real-time EEG is mapped to a generative soundscape with ...

EEG and Sonic Platforms to Enhance Mindfulness Meditation

ResearchGate

<https://www.researchgate.net> › publication › 32326194...

Currently, the BCI can record users' meditation and attention values to analyze their
current mental status. BCI technology can link with mindfulness and user ...

Meditation for mind-control

EurekAlert!

<https://www.eurekalert.org> › news-releases

Sep 23, 2020 — A BCI is an apparatus that allows an individual to control a machine or
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People also ask

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The Impact of Neurofeedback for Meditation

EMOTIV

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Aug 7, 2024 — Studies have suggested that EEG neurofeedback appears to increase state mindfulness in adults [1]. Transcendental Meditation: Neurofeedback can ...
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<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10193217>

by Y He · 2023 · Cited by 16 — This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a BCI-based mindfulness meditation app in improving the experience of patients with AF during RFCA.

Participants

Secondary Outcomes

Discussion

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American Folk Magic: 5 Types from New Orleans to the Ozarks

Italian Folk Magic - Salem Witch Museum

Types of Folk Magic

Folk Magic & Expanded Spell Scroll Rules | Take up a timeless ...

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Folk magic is practical, community-based magic rooted in local traditions, using everyday items like herbs, stones, and household objects for tangible results like healing, protection, or luck, differing from formal ceremonial magic by its accessibility and focus on common needs rather than complex dogma, often practiced by "cunning folk" or healers for their communities. It's organic, intuitive, and varies by culture, drawing from nature and personal experience rather than strict religious texts, though it can incorporate elements from various spiritual beliefs.

Key Characteristics

Practical & Community-Focused: Addresses everyday problems for individuals and communities, such as mending ailments, finding lost items, or ensuring good harvests.

Accessible Materials: Utilizes common, easily found items like plants, water, salt, candles, twine, and sometimes personal items.

Local & Cultural: Deeply tied to specific regions, folklore, and the natural environment, like Appalachian "granny magic" or sailor's charms.

Intuitive: Relies on personal intuition and connection, often with simple rituals like tying knots, reciting prayers, or marking paths.

Not Formal Witchcraft: Generally distinct from "witchcraft" as conceived in formal, ceremonial traditions, though related; folk practitioners (cunning folk) were often seen as helpful, not evil.

Examples of Practices

Using plants and herbs for healing and blessings (e.g., Appalachian magic).

Creating charms with nails, stones, or cloth for protection or love.

Performing simple divinations, like reading omens or using water.

Incorporating religious elements, like reciting specific prayers (Lord's Prayer, Apostle's Creed).

Modern Relevance

Modern practitioners often explore folk magic to build personal, meaningful practices rooted in history, combining traditional methods with contemporary intuition and local lore.

English Folk Dance and Song Society - Practical Magic

Folk magic was a major part of pre-modern English culture. Rituals for healing, future-telling, and other purposes were common across the country.

English Folk Dance and Song Society

Types of Folk Magic - Learn Religions

Catherine Beyer is a practicing Wiccan who has taught religion in at Lakeland College in Wisconsin as well as humanities and Western religions.

Learn Religions

Appalachian Folk Magic: Generations of “Granny Witchcraft” and Spiritual Work | Folklife Magazine

Appalachian folk magic, also known as granny magic, kitchen witchery, and Braucherei, is a tradition that uses native plants to heal and protect.

Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

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Folk magic and witchcraft | What's the difference

Cailleachs Herbarium

<https://cailleachs-herbarium.com> › 2016/05 › folk-magic...

May 28, 2016 — Folk magic practitioners do based on Scottish cultural traditions do and how it differs from Wicca, Traditional Witchcraft, shamanism, Druidry etc.

People also ask

What are the 4 types of magic?

What religion is folk magic?

What are 13 witches called?

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Folk Magick and how it operates : r/occult

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Folk magic refers to cultural sympathetic magic and superstition. Folk magic are things like nailing an iron nail above your passageways to ...

A few questions about folk magic : r/witchcraft - Reddit

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What is your 'folk-magic': magic used by everyday people

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Cunning folk

Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cunning_folk

Cunning folk, also known as folk healers or wise folk, were practitioners of folk medicine, helpful folk magic and divination in Europe from the Middle Ages

Appalachian Folk Magic: Generations of “Granny Witchcraft ...

Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

<https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/appalachian-folk-magic>

Aug 15, 2023 — In the Appalachian Mountains, folk magic goes by many names: root work, granny magic, kitchen witchery, Braucherei, witchcraft.

Videos

How to Create A Folk Magic Practice Beginner Folk Witchcraft

YouTube · Lauren Moss

Aug 26, 2023

YouTube · Lauren Moss

22:09

I wanted to make this video to talk about the why and how you can craft your own tradition that relies on historical practice and your own intuition.

Folk Witchcraft and Traditional Witchcraft: What's the Difference?

YouTube · Ariana Carrasca, The Oak Witch

Feb 14, 2024

YouTube · Ariana Carrasca, The Oak Witch

15:37

Traditional witchcraft is more structured, ceremonial, and may be initiatory, while folk witchcraft is more individualistic, animistic, and focused on local customs and spirits.

American Folk Magic and Christianity: From the Reformation ...

YouTube · Jonathan Pageau

Oct 2, 2025

YouTube · Jonathan Pageau

1:29:14

American folk magic in the context of American Christianity and the way that those things interrelate.

Feedback

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Otherworldly Oracle Market

Living Folk Magic: Crafting Your Own Magical Life: Fahrur ...

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Amazon.com

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Introduction to Witchcraft and Folk Magic Practices

Facebook · Spooky Souls

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A complex & personal practice, witchcraft is a method of folk magic, involving an in-depth knowledge of the natural world, the spiritual world ...

folk magic from www.facebook.com

Top answer:

You mean if I wanted truth, I'd go to church Hate to break it to you, but there is even ...

Many of today's modern witchcraft traditions are ...

Feb 17, 2023

Appalachian folk magic practices in families

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Witches & Witchcraft | My Jewish Learning

Witchcraft refers to the practice of magic or supernatural powers, historically associated with causing harm (maleficium) and often linked to evil spirits or the Devil, leading to

accusations and witch hunts, but today also encompasses modern, nature-based spiritual paths like Wicca, which use magic for healing, guidance, and personal growth, emphasizing benevolent intent, reverence for nature, and individual spiritual paths.

Historical & Traditional Views

Harmful Magic: In many cultures, witchcraft was seen as using occult powers to bring misfortune to others, often stemming from social tensions or disputes.

Religious Connection: The medieval Church linked witchcraft to heresy, apostasy, and pacts with the Devil, leading to severe persecution.

Accusations as Social Control: Accusations served as a cultural tool to punish non-conformity, with the accused often targeted due to jealousy or community conflicts, not actual malicious magic.

Modern & Contemporary Views (Wicca & Neo-Paganism)

Nature-Based Spirituality: Modern witchcraft (like Wicca) is a spiritual path focused on reverence for the Earth, natural cycles, and deities (often a God and Goddess).

Benevolent Magic: Practices focus on beneficial magic for healing, guidance, divination, and self-improvement, rejecting the idea of harming others due to principles like karma (the "threefold law").

Personal & Diverse: Practices vary widely, involving rituals, herbs, crystals, and tools like wands, with emphasis on personal energy, self-honoring, and unique paths.

Key Distinctions

Intent: Traditional witchcraft (in accusation) was seen as evil and harmful; modern witchcraft is largely benevolent.

Belief System: Modern witchcraft is a religion or spirituality, distinct from historical beliefs about witches communing with demons.

Practice: Modern practitioners engage in personal spiritual development, unlike the fearful stereotypes.

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Depiction of witchcraft in John William Waterhouse's painting *The Magic Circle* (1886)

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Witchcraft is the use of magic by a person called a witch. Traditionally, "witchcraft" means the use of magic to inflict supernatural harm or misfortune on others, and this remains the most common and widespread meaning.[1] Though the idea of witchcraft is largely imaginary, it has nevertheless served in many cultures as a way to explain the presence of evil.[2] The belief in witches has been found throughout history in a great number of societies worldwide. Most of these societies have used protective magic or counter-magic against witchcraft, and have shunned, banished, imprisoned, physically punished or killed alleged witches. Anthropologists use the term "witchcraft" for similar beliefs about harmful occult practices in different cultures, and these societies often use the term when speaking in English.[3][4][5]

Belief in witchcraft as malevolent magic is attested from ancient Mesopotamia, and in Europe, belief in witches traces back to classical antiquity. In medieval and early modern Europe, accused witches were usually women[6] who were believed to have secretly used black magic (maleficium) against their own community. Usually, accusations of witchcraft were made by neighbors of accused witches, and followed from social tensions. Witches were sometimes said to have communed with demons or with the Devil, though such accusations were mainly made against perceived opponents of the

Church.[7] It was thought witchcraft could be thwarted by white magic, provided by 'cunning folk' or 'wise people'. Suspected witches were often prosecuted and punished, if found guilty or simply believed to be guilty. European witch-hunts and witch trials in the early modern period led to tens of thousands of executions. While magical healers and midwives were sometimes accused of witchcraft,[8][4][9][10] they made up a minority of those accused. European belief in witchcraft gradually dwindled during and after the Age of Enlightenment.

Many indigenous belief systems that include the concept of witchcraft likewise define witches as malevolent, and seek healers (such as medicine people and witch doctors) to ward off and undo bewitchment.[11][12] Some African and Melanesian peoples believe witches are driven by an evil spirit or substance inside them. Modern witch-hunting takes place in parts of Africa and Asia.

Since the 1930s, followers of certain kinds of modern paganism identify as witches and redefine the term "witchcraft" as part of their neopagan beliefs and practices.[13][14][15] Other neo-pagans avoid the term due to its negative connotations.[16]

Concept

The Witches by Hans Baldung (woodcut), 1508

The most common meaning of "witchcraft" worldwide is the use of harmful magic.[17] Belief in malevolent magic and the concept of witchcraft has lasted throughout recorded history and has been found in cultures worldwide, regardless of development.[3][18] Most societies have feared an ability by some individuals to cause supernatural harm and misfortune to others. This may come from mankind's tendency "to want to assign occurrences of remarkable good or bad luck to agency, either human or superhuman". [19] Historians and anthropologists see the concept of "witchcraft" as one of the ways humans have tried to explain strange misfortune.[19][20] Some cultures have feared witchcraft much less than others because they tend to have other explanations for strange misfortune.[19] For example, the Gaels of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands historically held a strong belief in fairy folk, who could cause supernatural harm, and witch-hunting was very rare in these regions compared to other regions of the British Isles.[21]

Historian Ronald Hutton outlined five key characteristics ascribed to witches and witchcraft by most cultures that believe in this concept: the use of magic to cause harm or misfortune to others; it was used by the witch against their own community; powers of witchcraft were believed to have been acquired through inheritance or initiation; it was seen as immoral and often thought to involve communion with evil beings; and witchcraft could be thwarted by defensive magic, persuasion, intimidation or physical punishment of the alleged witch.[17]

A common belief worldwide is that witches use objects, words, and gestures to cause supernatural harm, or that they simply have an innate power to do so. Hutton notes that

both kinds of practitioners are often believed to exist in the same culture and that the two often overlap, in that someone with an inborn power could wield that power through material objects.[22]

One of the most influential works on witchcraft and concepts of magic was E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, a study of Azande witchcraft beliefs published in 1937. This provided definitions for witchcraft which became a convention in anthropology.[20] However, some researchers argue that the general adoption of Evans-Pritchard's definitions constrained discussion of witchcraft beliefs, and even broader discussion of magic and religion, in ways that his work does not support.[23] Evans-Pritchard reserved the term "witchcraft" for the actions of those who inflict harm by their inborn power and used "sorcery" for those who needed tools to do so.[24] Historians found these definitions difficult to apply to European witchcraft, where witches were believed to use physical techniques, as well as some who were believed to cause harm by thought alone.[25][26] The distinction "has now largely been abandoned, although some anthropologists still sometimes find it relevant to the particular societies with which they are concerned".[22]

While most cultures believe witchcraft to be something willful, some Indigenous peoples in Africa and Melanesia believe witches have a substance or an evil spirit in their bodies that drives them to do harm.[22] Such substances may be believed to act on their own while the witch is sleeping or unaware.[23] The Dobu people believe women work harmful magic in their sleep while men work it while awake.[27] Further, in cultures where substances within the body are believed to grant supernatural powers, the substance may be good, bad, or morally neutral.[28][29] Hutton draws a distinction between those who unwittingly cast the evil eye and those who deliberately do so, describing only the latter as witches.[19]

The universal or cross-cultural validity of the terms "witch" and "witchcraft" are debated. [20] Hutton states:

[Malevolent magic] is, however, only one current usage of the word. In fact, Anglo-American senses of it now take at least four different forms, although the one discussed above seems still to be the most widespread and frequent. The others define the witch figure as any person who uses magic ... or as the practitioner of nature-based Pagan religion; or as a symbol of independent female authority and resistance to male domination. All have validity in the present.[19]

According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions there is "difficulty of defining 'witches' and 'witchcraft' across cultures—terms that, quite apart from their connotations in popular culture, may include an array of traditional or faith healing practices".[30]

Anthropologist Fiona Bowie notes that the terms "witchcraft" and "witch" are used differently by scholars and the general public in at least four ways.[20] Neopagan writer

Isaac Bonewits proposed dividing witches into even more distinct types including, but not limited to: Neopagan, Feminist, Neogothic, Neoclassical, Classical, Family Traditions, Immigrant Traditions, and Ethnic.[31]

Etymology

Further information: Witch (word)

The word "witchcraft" is over a thousand years old: Old English formed the compound *wiccecræft* from *wicce* ('witch') and *cræft* ('craft').[32] The masculine form was *wicca* ('male sorcerer').[33]

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *wicce* and *wicca* were probably derived from the Old English verb *wiccian*, meaning 'to practice witchcraft'.[34] *Wiccian* has a cognate in Middle Low German *wicken* (attested from the 13th century). The further etymology of this word is problematic. It has no clear cognates in other Germanic languages outside of English and Low German, and there are numerous possibilities for the Indo-European root from which it may have derived.

Another Old English word for 'witch' was *hægtes* or *hægtesse*, which became the modern English word "hag" and is linked to the word "hex". In most other Germanic languages, their word for 'witch' comes from the same root as these; for example German *Hexe* and Dutch *heks*. [35]

In colloquial modern English, the word *witch* is particularly used for women.[36] A male practitioner of magic or witchcraft is more commonly called a 'wizard', or sometimes, 'warlock'. When the word *witch* is used to refer to a member of a neo-pagan tradition or religion (such as *Wicca*), it can refer to a person of any gender.[37]

Beliefs about practices

Preparation for the Witches' Sabbath by David Teniers the Younger. It shows a witch brewing a potion overlooked by her familiar spirit or a demon; items on the floor for casting a spell; and another witch reading from a grimoire while anointing the buttocks of a young witch about to fly upon an inverted besom.

Witches are commonly believed to cast curses; a spell or set of magical words and gestures intended to inflict supernatural harm.[38] Cursing could also involve inscribing runes or sigils on an object to give that object magical powers; burning or binding a wax or clay image (a poppet) of a person to affect them magically; or using herbs, animal parts and other substances to make potions or poisons.[39][40][41][22] Witchcraft has been blamed for many kinds of misfortune. In Europe, by far the most common kind of harm attributed to witchcraft was illness or death suffered by adults, their children, or their animals. "Certain ailments, like impotence in men, infertility in women, and lack of milk in cows, were particularly associated with witchcraft". Illnesses that were poorly understood were more likely to be blamed on witchcraft. Edward Bever writes:

"Witchcraft was particularly likely to be suspected when a disease came on unusually swiftly, lingered unusually long, could not be diagnosed clearly, or presented some other

unusual symptoms".[42]

A common belief in cultures worldwide is that witches tend to use something from their target's body to work magic against them; for example hair, nail clippings, clothing, or bodily waste.[22] Such beliefs are found in Europe, Africa, South Asia, Polynesia, Melanesia, and North America.[22] Another widespread belief among Indigenous peoples in Africa and North America is that witches cause harm by introducing cursed magical objects into their victim's body; such as small bones or ashes.[22] James George Frazer described this kind of magic as imitative.[a]

In some cultures, witches are believed to use human body parts in magic,[22] and they are commonly believed to murder children for this purpose. In Europe, "cases in which women did undoubtedly kill their children, because of what today would be called postpartum psychosis, were often interpreted as yielding to diabolical temptation".[44]

Witches are believed to work in secret, sometimes alone and sometimes with other witches. Hutton writes: "Across most of the world, witches have been thought to gather at night, when normal humans are inactive, and also at their most vulnerable in sleep".[22] In most cultures, witches at these gatherings are thought to transgress social norms by engaging in cannibalism, incest and open nudity.[22]

Witches around the world commonly have associations with animals.[45] Rodney Needham identified this as a defining feature of the witch archetype.[46] In some parts of the world, it is believed witches can shapeshift into animals,[47] or that the witch's spirit travels apart from their body and takes an animal form, an activity often associated with shamanism.[47] Another widespread belief is that witches have an animal helper.[47] In English these are often called "familiars", and meant an evil spirit or demon that had taken an animal form.[47] As researchers examined traditions in other regions, they widened the term to servant spirit-animals which are described as a part of the witch's own soul.[48]

Necromancy is the practice of conjuring the spirits of the dead for divination or prophecy, although the term has also been applied to raising the dead for other purposes. The biblical Witch of Endor performed it (1 Samuel 28th chapter), and it is among the witchcraft practices condemned by Ælfric of Eynsham:[49][50][51] "Witches still go to cross-roads and to heathen burials with their delusive magic and call to the devil; and he comes to them in the likeness of the man that is buried there, as if he arises from death."[52]

J.D. Krige argues that belief in witchcraft also serves various functions. One such function, he notes, is psychological: it enables people to account for failures not as a result of any fault of their own but due to the doings of others or other external malevolent forces. In this way, people can "compensate for their inadequacy and continue to feel that they are masters of their own fate".[53]

Witchcraft and folk healers

Main article: Cunning folk

Diorama of a cunning woman or wise woman in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic
Most societies that have believed in harmful or black magic have also believed in helpful or white magic.[54] Where belief in harmful magic is common, it is typically forbidden by law as well as hated and feared by the general populace, while helpful or apotropaic (protective) magic is tolerated or accepted by the population, even if the orthodox establishment opposes it.[55]

In these societies, practitioners of helpful magic provide (or provided) services such as breaking the effects of witchcraft, healing, divination, finding lost or stolen goods, and love magic.[56] In Britain, and some other parts of Europe, they were commonly known as 'cunning folk' or 'wise people'.[56] Alan Macfarlane wrote that while cunning folk is the usual name, some are also known as 'blessers' or 'wizards', but might also be known as 'white', 'good', or 'unbinding witches'.[57] Historian Owen Davies says the term "white witch" was rarely used before the 20th century.[58] Ronald Hutton uses the general term "service magicians".[56] Often these people were involved in identifying alleged witches.[54]

Such helpful magic-workers "were normally contrasted with the witch who practiced maleficium—that is, magic used for harmful ends".[59] In the early years of the European witch hunts "the cunning folk were widely tolerated by church, state and general populace".[59] Some of the more hostile churchmen and secular authorities tried to smear folk-healers and magic-workers by falsely branding them 'witches' and associating them with harmful 'witchcraft',[56] but generally the masses did not accept this and continued to make use of their services.[60] The English MP and skeptic Reginald Scot sought to disprove magic and witchcraft altogether, writing in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), "At this day, it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, 'she is a witch' or 'she is a wise woman'".[61] Historian Keith Thomas adds "Nevertheless, it is possible to isolate that kind of 'witchcraft' which involved the employment (or presumed employment) of some occult means of doing harm to other people in a way which was generally disapproved of. In this sense the belief in witchcraft can be defined as the attribution of misfortune to occult human agency".[4]

Emma Wilby says folk magicians in Europe were viewed ambivalently by communities, and were considered as capable of harming as of healing,[62] which could lead to their being accused as malevolent witches. She suggests some English "witches" convicted of consorting with demons may have been cunning folk whose supposed fairy familiars had been demonised.[63]

Hutton says that magical healers "were sometimes denounced as witches, but seem to have made up a minority of the accused in any area studied".[54] Likewise, Davies says "relatively few cunning-folk were prosecuted under secular statutes for witchcraft" and were dealt with more leniently than alleged witches. The *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*

(1532) of the Holy Roman Empire, and the Danish Witchcraft Act of 1617, stated that workers of folk magic should be dealt with differently from witches.[64] It was suggested by Richard Horsley that 'diviner-healers' (devins-guerisseurs) made up a significant proportion of those tried for witchcraft in France and Switzerland, but more recent surveys conclude that they made up less than 2% of the accused.[65] However, Éva Pócs says that half the accused witches in Hungary seem to have been healers,[66] and Kathleen Stokker says the "vast majority" of Norway's accused witches were folk healers.[67]

Witch-hunts and thwarting witchcraft

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A witch bottle, used as counter-magic against witchcraft

Societies that believe (or believed) in witchcraft may also believe that it can be thwarted in various ways. One common way is to use protective magic or counter-magic, often with the help of magical healers such as cunning folk or witch-doctors.[54] This includes performing rituals, reciting charms, or the use of talismans, amulets, anti-witch marks, witch bottles, witch balls, and burying objects such as horse skulls inside the walls of buildings.[68] Another believed cure for bewitchment is to persuade or force the alleged witch to lift their spell.[54] Often, people have attempted to thwart the witchcraft by physically punishing the alleged witch, such as by banishing, wounding, torturing or killing them. Hutton wrote that "In most societies, however, a formal and legal remedy was preferred to this sort of private action", whereby the alleged witch would be prosecuted and then formally punished if found guilty.[54]

Accusations of witchcraft

The torture used against accused witches, 1577

Throughout the world, accusations of witchcraft are often linked to social and economic tensions. Females are most often accused, especially in more male-dominated societies like 16th-century America.[69] However, in some cultures it was mostly males, such as in 17th-century Iceland.[70] In many societies, accusations are directed mainly against the elderly, but in others age is not a factor, and in some cultures it is mainly adolescents who are accused.[71]

Éva Pócs writes that reasons for accusations of witchcraft fall into four general categories. The first three of which were proposed by Richard Kieckhefer, and the fourth added by Christina Lerner:[72]

A person was caught in the act of positive or negative sorcery

A well-meaning sorcerer or healer lost their clients' or the authorities' trust

A person did nothing more than gain the enmity of their neighbors

A person was reputed to be a witch and surrounded with an aura of witch-beliefs or occultism.

Modern witch-hunts

Main articles: Witch-hunt, Witch trials in the early modern period, and Modern witch-hunts

Witch-hunts, scapegoating, and the shunning or murder of suspected witches still occurs.[73] Many cultures worldwide continue to have a belief in the concept of "witchcraft" or malevolent magic.[74]

Apart from extrajudicial violence, state-sanctioned execution also occurs in some jurisdictions. For instance, in Saudi Arabia practicing witchcraft and sorcery is a crime punishable by death and the country has executed people for this crime as recently as 2014.[75][76][77]

Witchcraft-related violence is often discussed as a serious issue in the broader context of violence against women.[78][79][80][81][82] In Tanzania, an estimated 500 older women are murdered each year following accusations of witchcraft or accusations of being a witch, according to a 2014 World Health Organization report.[83]

Children who live in some regions of the world, such as parts of Africa, are also vulnerable to violence stemming from witchcraft accusations.[84][85][86][87] Such incidents have also occurred in immigrant communities in Britain, including the much publicized case of the murder of Victoria Climbié.[88][89]

Religious perspectives

Ancient Mesopotamian religion

A clay tablet from the Maqlû, outlining an ancient Akkadian anti-witchcraft ritual

Main article: Witchcraft in the Middle East

Magic was an important part of ancient Mesopotamian religion and society, which distinguished between 'good' (helpful) and 'bad' (harmful) rites.[90] In ancient Mesopotamia, practitioners mainly used counter-magic against witchcraft (kišpū[91]); the law codes also prescribed the death penalty for those found guilty of witchcraft.[90] According to Tzvi Abusch, ancient Mesopotamian ideas about witches and witchcraft shifted over time, and the early stages were "comparable to the archaic shamanistic stage of European witchcraft".[92] In this early stage, witches were not necessarily considered evil, but took 'white' and 'black' forms, could help others using magic and medical knowledge, generally lived in rural areas, and sometimes exhibited ecstatic behavior.[92]

In ancient Mesopotamia, a witch (m. kaššāpu, f. kaššāptu, from kašāpu ['to bewitch'] [91]) was "usually regarded as an anti-social and illegitimate practitioner of destructive magic ... whose activities were motivated by malice and evil intent and who was

opposed by the *ašipu*, an exorcist or incantation-priest".[92] These *ašipu* were predominantly male representatives of the state religion, whose main role was to work magic against harmful supernatural forces such as demons.[92] The stereotypical witch mentioned in the sources tended to be those of low status who were weak or otherwise marginalized, including women, foreigners, actors, and peddlers.[90]

The Code of Hammurabi (18th century BCE) allowed someone accused of harmful magic-practice to undergo trial by ordeal—by jumping into a holy river. If they drowned, they were deemed guilty, and the accuser inherited the guilty person's estate. If they survived, the accuser's estate was handed over instead.[90]

The *Maqlû* ("burning") is an ancient Akkadian text written early in the first millennium BCE, which sets out a Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft ritual.[93] This lengthy ritual includes invoking various gods, burning an effigy of the witch, then dousing and disposing of the remains.[94]

Abrahamic religions

The historical development of witchcraft in the Middle East shows a multi-stage process shaped by culture, spirituality, and societal norms. Ancient witchcraft in the Middle East intertwined mysticism with nature through rituals and incantations aligned with local beliefs. The position of magic among ancient Jews and within Judaism was complex, with some forms accepted as mysticism and others disapproved of as heresy.[95][96] The medieval Middle East experienced shifting perceptions of witchcraft under Islamic and Christian influences, sometimes revered for healing and other times condemned as heresy.

Jewish

See also: Witchcraft and divination in the Hebrew Bible

Jewish attitudes toward witchcraft were rooted in its association with idolatry and necromancy, and some rabbis even practiced forms of magic themselves.[97][98]

References to witchcraft in the Hebrew Bible highlighted strong condemnations rooted in the "abomination" of magical practices. Christianity later similarly condemned witchcraft, considering it an abomination and using select verses to justify witch hunting during the early modern period.

Christian

Illustration by Martin van Maële of a Witches' Sabbath and Black Mass overseen by a horned Devil, in the 1911 edition of *La Sorcière*, by Jules Michelet

Main article: Christian views on magic

Historically, the Christian concept of witchcraft derives from Old Testament laws against it. In medieval and early-modern Europe, many Christians believed in magic. As opposed to the helpful magic of the cunning folk, witchcraft was seen as evil and associated with Satan and devil worship. This often resulted in deaths, torture and scapegoating (casting blame for misfortune),[99][100] and many years of large-scale

witch trials and witch hunts, especially in Protestant Europe, before largely ending during the Age of Enlightenment. Christian views are diverse, ranging from intense belief and opposition (especially by Christian fundamentalists) to non-belief. During the Age of Colonialism, many cultures were exposed to the Western world via colonialism, usually accompanied by intensive Christian missionary activity (see Christianization). In these cultures, beliefs about witchcraft were partly influenced by the prevailing Western concepts of the time.

In Christianity, sorcery came to be associated with heresy and apostasy and was viewed as evil. Among Catholics, Protestants, and the secular leadership of late-medieval/early-modern Europe, fears about witchcraft rose to a fever pitch and sometimes led to large-scale witch hunts. The fifteenth century saw a dramatic rise in awareness and terror of witchcraft. Tens of thousands of people were executed, and others were imprisoned, tortured, banished, and had lands and possessions confiscated. The majority of those accused were women, though in some regions the majority were men.[101][102]:23 In Scots, the word warlock came to be used as the male equivalent of witch (which can be male or female, but is used predominantly for females).[103][104]

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of the Witches) was a witch-hunting manual written in 1486 by German monk-inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. It was used by both Catholics and Protestants[105] for several hundred years, outlining how to identify a witch, what makes a woman more likely than a man to be a witch, how to put a witch on trial, and how to punish a witch. The book defines a witch as evil and typically female. It became the handbook for secular courts throughout Europe, but was not used by the Inquisition, which even cautioned against relying on it.[106] It was the most sold book in Europe for over 100 years (after the Christian Bible).[107]

Islamic

Main article: Islam and magic

Islamic perspectives on magic encompass a wide range of practices,[108] with belief in black magic and the evil eye coexisting alongside strict prohibitions against its practice. [109] The Quran acknowledges the existence of magic and seeks protection from its harm. Islam's stance is against the practice of magic, considering it forbidden, and emphasizes miracles rather than magic or witchcraft.[110] The historical continuity of witchcraft in the Middle East underlines the complex interaction between spiritual beliefs and societal norms across different cultures and epochs.

Modern paganism

The sorceress Ceridwen of Welsh mythology is considered a Goddess in Modern paganism and Wicca.[111]

Main articles: Neopagan witchcraft and Semitic neopaganism

During the 20th century, interest in witchcraft rose in English-speaking and European countries. From the 1920s, Margaret Murray popularized the 'witch-cult hypothesis': the

idea that those persecuted as 'witches' in early modern Europe were followers of a benevolent pagan religion that had survived the Christianization of Europe. This has been discredited by further historical research.[112][113][114][115][116]

From the 1930s, occult neopagan groups began to emerge who called their religion a kind of 'witchcraft'. They were initiatory secret societies inspired by Murray's 'witch cult' theory, ceremonial magic, Aleister Crowley's Thelema, and historical paganism.[117][118][119] The biggest religious movement to emerge from this is Wicca. Today, some Wiccans and members of related traditions self-identify as "witches" and use the term "witchcraft" for their magico-religious beliefs and practices, primarily in Western anglophone countries.[13]

Regional perspectives

Prevalence of belief in witchcraft by country[120]

Socio-demographic correlates of witchcraft beliefs[120]

A 2022 study found that belief in witchcraft, as in the use of malevolent magic or powers, is still widespread in some parts of the world. It found that belief in witchcraft varied from 9% of people in some countries to 90% in others, and was linked to cultural and socioeconomic factors. Stronger belief in witchcraft correlated with poorer economic development, weak institutions, lower levels of education, lower life expectancy, lower life satisfaction, and high religiosity.[121][120]

It contrasted two hypotheses about future changes in witchcraft belief:[120]

witchcraft beliefs should decline "in the process of development due to improved security and health, lower exposure to shocks, spread of education and scientific approach to explaining life events" according to standard modernization theory "some aspects of development, namely rising inequality, globalization, technological change, and migration, may instead revive witchcraft beliefs by disrupting established social order" according to literature largely inspired by observations from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Africa

Main article: Witchcraft in Africa

African witchcraft encompasses various beliefs and practices. These beliefs often play a significant role in shaping social dynamics and can influence how communities address challenges and seek spiritual assistance. Much of what "witchcraft" represents in Africa has been susceptible to misunderstandings and confusion, due to a tendency among western scholars to approach the subject through a comparative lens vis-a-vis European witchcraft.[122] For example, the Maka people of Cameroon believe in an occult force known as djambe, that dwells inside a person. It is often translated as "witchcraft" or "sorcery", but it has a broader meaning that encompasses supernatural harm, healing and shapeshifting; this highlights the problem of using European terms for African concepts.[123]

While some 19th–20th century European colonialists tried to stamp out witch-hunting in Africa by introducing laws banning accusations of witchcraft, some former African colonies introduced laws banning witchcraft after they gained independence. This has produced an environment that encourages persecution of suspected witches.[124]

In the Central African Republic, hundreds of people are convicted of witchcraft yearly, with reports of violence against accused women.[125] The Democratic Republic of the Congo witnessed a disturbing trend of child witchcraft accusations in Kinshasa, leading to abuse and exorcisms supervised by self-styled pastors.[126] In Ghana, there are several "witch camps", where women accused of witchcraft can seek refuge, though the government plans to close them.[127]

In west Kenya, there have been cases of accused witches being burned to death in their homes by mobs.[128] Malawi faces a similar issue of child witchcraft accusations, with traditional healers and some Christian counterparts involved in exorcisms, causing abandonment and abuse of children.[129] In Nigeria, Pentecostal pastors have intertwined Christianity with witchcraft beliefs for profit, leading to the torture and killing of accused children.[130] Sierra Leone's Mende people see witchcraft convictions as beneficial, as the accused receive support and care from the community.[131]

Lastly, in Zulu culture, healers known as sangomas protect people from witchcraft and evil spirits through divination, rituals and mediumship.[132] However, concerns arise regarding the training and authenticity of some sangomas.

In parts of Africa, beliefs about illness being caused by witchcraft continue to fuel suspicion of modern medicine, with serious healthcare consequences. HIV/AIDS[133] and Ebola[134] are two examples of often-lethal infectious disease epidemics whose medical care and containment has been severely hampered by regional beliefs in witchcraft. Other severe medical conditions whose treatment is hampered in this way include tuberculosis, leprosy, epilepsy and the common severe bacterial Buruli ulcer. [135][136]

Americas

North America

Main article: Witchcraft in North America

North America hosts a diverse array of beliefs about witchcraft, some of which have evolved through interactions between cultures.[137][138]

Native American peoples such as the Cherokee,[139] Hopi,[140] the Navajo[5] among others,[141] believed in malevolent "witch" figures who could harm their communities by supernatural means; this was often punished harshly, including by execution.[142] In these communities, medicine people were healers and protectors against witchcraft. [139][140]

The term "witchcraft" arrived with European colonists, along with European views on witchcraft.[137] This term would be adopted by many Indigenous communities for their own beliefs about harmful magic and harmful supernatural powers. Witch hunts took place among Christian European settlers in colonial America and the United States, most infamously the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts. These trials led to the execution of numerous individuals accused of practicing witchcraft. Despite changes in laws and perspectives over time, accusations of witchcraft persisted into the 19th century in some regions, such as Tennessee, where prosecutions occurred as late as 1833.

Some North American witchcraft beliefs were influenced by beliefs about witchcraft in Latin America, and by African witchcraft beliefs through the slave trade.[143][144][138] Native American cultures adopted the term for their own witchcraft beliefs.[145] Neopagan witchcraft practices such as Wicca then emerged in the mid-20th century. [137][138]

Latin America

Main article: Witchcraft in Latin America

Witchcraft beliefs in Latin America are influenced by Spanish Catholic, Indigenous, and African beliefs. In Colonial Mexico, the Mexican Inquisition showed little concern for witchcraft; the Spanish Inquisitors treated witchcraft accusations as a "religious problem that could be resolved through confession and absolution". Anthropologist Ruth Behar writes that Mexican Inquisition cases "hint at a fascinating conjecture of sexuality, witchcraft, and religion, in which Spanish, indigenous, and African cultures converged". [146] There are cases where European women and Indigenous women were accused of collaborating to work "love magic" or "sexual witchcraft" against men in colonial Mexico. [147] According to anthropology professor Laura Lewis, "witchcraft" in colonial Mexico represented an "affirmation of hegemony" for women and especially Indigenous women over their white male counterparts in the *casta* system.[148]

Belief in witchcraft is a constant in the history of colonial Brazil, for example the several denunciations and confessions given to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of Bahia (1591–1593), Pernambuco and Paraíba (1593–1595).[149]

Brujería, often called a Latin American form of witchcraft, is a syncretic Afro-Caribbean tradition that combines Indigenous religious and magical practices from the Caribbean, together with Catholicism, and European witchcraft.[150] The tradition and terminology is considered to encompass both helpful and harmful practices.[151] A male practitioner is called a brujo, a female practitioner, a bruja.[151] Healers may be further distinguished by the terms *kurioso* or *kuradó*, a man or woman who performs *trabou chikí* ("little works") and *trabou grandi* ("large treatments") to promote or restore health, bring fortune or misfortune, deal with unrequited love, and more serious concerns. Sorcery usually involves reference to an entity referred to as the *almasola* or *homber chiki*. [152]

Asia

Main article: Asian witchcraft

Okabe – The cat witch, by Utagawa Kuniyoshi

East Asia

In Chinese culture, the practice of Gong Tau involves black magic for purposes such as revenge and financial assistance.[citation needed] Japanese folklore features witch figures who employ foxes as familiars. Korean history includes instances of individuals being condemned for using spells. The Philippines has its own tradition of Philippine witches, distinct from Western portrayals, with their practices often countered by indigenous Philippine shamans.[citation needed]

Middle East

Main article: Witchcraft in the Middle East

Witchcraft beliefs in the Middle East have a long history, and magic was a part of the ancient cultures and religions of the region.[153]

In ancient Mesopotamia (Sumeria, Assyria, Babylonia), a witch (m. kaššāpu, f. kaššāptu) was "usually regarded as an anti-social and illegitimate practitioner of destructive magic ... motivated by malice and evil intent".[92] Ancient Mesopotamian societies mainly used counter-magic against witchcraft (kišpū), but the law codes also prescribed the death penalty for those found guilty of witchcraft.[90]

For the ancient Hittites, magic could only be sanctioned by the state, and accusations of witchcraft were often used to control political enemies.[154]

As the ancient Hebrews focused on their worship on Yahweh, Judaism clearly distinguished between forms of magic and mystical practices which were accepted, and those which were viewed as forbidden or heretical, and thus "witchcraft".[155]

In the medieval Middle East, under Islamic and Christian influences, witchcraft's perception fluctuated between healing and heresy, revered by some and condemned by others.[citation needed] In the present day diverse witchcraft communities have emerged.[citation needed]

Europe

Main article: European witchcraft

Ancient Roman world

Main article: European witchcraft § Antiquity

Caius Furius Cressinus Accused of Sorcery, Jean-Pierre Saint-Ours, 1792

European belief in witchcraft can be traced back to classical antiquity, when concepts of magic and religion were closely related. During the pagan era of ancient Rome, there were laws against harmful magic.[156] According to Pliny, the 5th century BCE laws of the Twelve Tables laid down penalties for uttering harmful incantations and for stealing

the fruitfulness of someone else's crops by magic.[156] The only recorded trial involving this law was that of Gaius Furius Cresimus.[156]

The Classical Latin word *veneficium* meant both poisoning and causing harm by magic (such as magic potions), although ancient people would not have distinguished between the two.[157] In 331 BCE, a deadly epidemic hit Rome and at least 170 women were executed for causing it by *veneficium*. In 184–180 BCE, another epidemic hit Italy, and about 5,000 were executed for *veneficium*.^[157] If the reports are accurate, writes Hutton, "then the Republican Romans hunted witches on a scale unknown anywhere else in the ancient world".^[157]

Under the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficis* of 81 BCE, killing by *veneficium* carried the death penalty. During the early Imperial era, the *Lex Cornelia* began to be used more broadly against other kinds of magic,^[157] including sacrifices made for evil purposes. The magicians were to be burnt at the stake.^[156]

Witch characters—women who work powerful evil magic—appear in ancient Roman literature from the first century BCE onward. They are typically hags who chant harmful incantations; make poisonous potions from herbs and the body parts of animals and humans; sacrifice children; raise the dead; can control the natural world; can shapeshift themselves and others into animals; and invoke underworld deities and spirits. They include Lucan's *Erichtho*, Horace's *Canidia*, Ovid's *Dipsas*, and Apuleius's *Meroe*.^[157]

Early modern and contemporary Europe

A 1613 English pamphlet showing "Witches apprehended, examined and executed" icon

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By the early modern period, major witch hunts and witch trials began to take place in Europe, partly fueled by religious tensions, societal anxieties, and economic upheaval. One influential text was the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 1486 treatise that provided a framework for identifying, prosecuting, and punishing witches. Witches were typically seen as people who caused harm or misfortune through black magic, and were sometimes believed to have made a pact with the Devil.^[158] Usually, accusations of witchcraft were made by neighbors and followed from social tensions. Accusations were often made against marginalized individuals, women, the elderly, and those who did not conform to societal norms. Women made accusations as often as men. The common people believed that magical healers (called 'cunning folk' or 'wise people') could undo bewitchment. Hutton says that magical healers were sometimes denounced as witches themselves, "but seem to have made up a minority of the accused in any area studied".^[54] The witch-craze reached its peak between the 16th and 17th centuries, resulting in the execution of tens of thousands of people. This dark period of history reflects the

confluence of superstition, fear, and authority, as well as the societal tendency to find scapegoats for complex problems. A feminist interpretation of the witch trials is that misogynist views led to the association of women and malevolent witchcraft.[158]

During the 16th century and mid 18th century Scotland had 4000-6000 prosecutions against accused witches, a much higher rate than the European average.[159][160]

Russia also experienced its own iteration of witchcraft trials during the 17th century. Witches were often accused of sorcery and engaging in supernatural activities, leading to their excommunication and execution. The blending of ecclesiastical and secular jurisdictions in Russia's approach to witchcraft trials highlighted the intertwined nature of religious and political power during that time. As the 17th century progressed, the fear of witches shifted from mere superstition to a tool for political manipulation, with accusations used to target individuals who posed threats to the ruling elite.[161]

Since the 1940s, neopagan witchcraft movements have emerged in Europe, seeking to revive and reinterpret ancient pagan and mystical practices. Wicca, pioneered by Gerald Gardner, is the most influential. Drawing inspiration from ceremonial magic, historical paganism, and the now-discredited witch-cult theory, Wicca emphasizes a connection to nature, the divine, and personal growth. Similarly, Stregheria in Italy reflects a desire to reconnect with the country's pagan past. Many of these neopagans self-identify as "witches". Neopagan witchcraft in Europe encompasses a wide range of traditions.
[citation needed]

Oceania

[icon]

This section needs expansion. You can help by adding to it.

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Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery are widespread across Oceania, where traditional spiritual systems often coexist with introduced religions such as Christianity. In many societies, witchcraft serves as an explanation for illness, death, or misfortune, and may be associated with social tensions or unresolved conflicts.

In the Cook Islands, the Māori term for black magic is purepure.[162] Practitioners known as ta'unga historically served as priests, healers, and spiritual advisors. They were believed to possess sacred knowledge and were responsible for conducting rituals, healing the sick, and maintaining spiritual balance within the community.[163]

In Papua New Guinea, belief in witchcraft—often referred to locally as sanguma—remains deeply ingrained in many communities, particularly in the Highlands region. Sorcery is commonly blamed for unexplained deaths, illness, crop failure, or other misfortunes. It is estimated that 50 to 150 people are killed each year in the country as a result of witchcraft accusations.[164] In 2008, reports indicated that more than fifty individuals were killed in two Highlands provinces alone for allegedly practicing sorcery.

[165] Victims are often women, and attacks may involve torture, public shaming, or execution. Although the government repealed the Sorcery Act in 2013, which previously allowed sorcery as a defense in murder cases, enforcement of protective laws remains inconsistent, and community-led violence continues.

In Milne Bay Province, including the Samarai Islands, witchcraft beliefs persist, but violence against the accused is significantly lower compared to the Highlands. Anthropological research suggests that local interpretations of witchcraft in these areas are less associated with malevolence and more integrated into broader spiritual and cultural practices. This has been linked to greater social standing for women and fewer gender-based witchcraft accusations.[166]

Other parts of Oceania, including Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, also maintain traditions involving spiritual power and magical influence. In Fiji, for example, concepts such as *valavala vakalou* (spiritual acts) and traditional healing practices are still recognized in some rural areas. However, the influence of Christianity and formal legal systems has reduced the prevalence of witchcraft-related violence. In many Pacific Island societies today, witchcraft is viewed through a cultural or religious lens rather than a criminal one, and cases involving supernatural claims are more likely to be addressed through customary dispute resolution or church-based mediation.

Witches in art and literature

Further information: Witch (archetype) § In art and literature, and List of fictional witches

Albrecht Dürer c. 1500: Witch riding backwards on a goat

Witches have a long history of being depicted in art, although most of their earliest artistic depictions seem to originate in Early Modern Europe, particularly the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Many scholars attribute their manifestation in art as inspired by texts such as *Canon Episcopi*, a demonology-centered work of literature, and *Malleus Maleficarum*, a "witch-craze" manual published in 1487, by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger.[167] Witches in fiction span a wide array of characterizations. They are typically, but not always, female, and generally depicted as either villains or heroines. [168]

See also

Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches – 1899 book by Charles Godfrey Leland

Feminist interpretations of witch trials in the early modern period

Flying ointment – Hallucinogenic salve used in the practice of witchcraft

History of goetia – Magical practice involving evocation of spirits

Kitchen witch – Witch doll

Witches' Sabbath – Gathering of those believed to practice witchcraft

Cunning folk

Notes

"If we analyze the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect

resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. The former principle may be called the Law of Similarity, the latter the Law of Contact or Contagion. From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not."[43]

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Book of Shadows

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This article is about the Wiccan book. For other uses, see [Book of Shadows](#) (disambiguation).

One of Gerald Gardner's earliest Books of Shadows

A Book of Shadows is a book containing religious text and instructions for magical

rituals found within the Neopagan religion of Wicca. Since its conception, it has made its way into many pagan practices and paths. The most famous Book of Shadows was created by the pioneering Wiccan Gerald Gardner sometime in the late 1940s or early 1950s, and which he utilised first in his Bricket Wood coven and then in other covens which he founded in following decades. The Book of Shadows is also used by other Wiccan traditions, such as Alexandrian Wicca and Mohsianism, and with the rise of books teaching people how to begin following non-initiatory Wicca in the 1970s onward, the idea of the Book of Shadows was then further propagated amongst solitary practitioners unconnected to earlier, initiatory traditions.

Initially, when Wicca was still dominated by covens, "only one copy [of the Book] existed for an entire coven, kept by the high priestess or high priest. That rule has proved unfeasible, and it is [now] commonplace for all Witches to have their own copies." [1] In the various traditions that make up British Traditional Wicca, copies of the original Book composed by Gerald Gardner with the aid of his High Priestess Doreen Valiente, along with alterations and additions that have been made since then, is followed by adherents. Though originally a secret text only given to initiates of Wicca, many initiate and non-initiates alike have gone on to print various Books of Shadows. These figures include Charles Cardell, Lady Sheba, and Janet and Stewart Farrar to name a few. In other Wiccan traditions and amongst a number of solitary practitioners, alternate versions of the Book of Shadows have been written, which are independent of Gardner's original.

Numerous associations and traditions have since grown up around the Book of Shadows. Traditionally, "a Witch's book of shadows is destroyed upon death." [2] It can be an experimental practice, everyday ritual works, or a record of magic. This is also a book of inspiration and can be used in future rituals. The concept of the Book of Shadows has subsequently appeared in popular culture, for instance being used in the American television series *Charmed*, which popularised the Book of Shadows.

History

Origins

Gerald Gardner, the "father of Wicca", first introduced the Book of Shadows to people that he had initiated into the craft through his Bricket Wood coven in the 1950s. He claimed that it was a personal cookbook of spells that have worked for the owner; they could copy from his own book and add material as they saw fit. He said that the practice of Witches keeping such a book was ancient, and was practised by the Witch-cult throughout history. According to tradition, Gardner claimed that the Book of Shadows was burned after a person died, so that it would not be discovered that they had been a witch.

Gerald Gardner did not mention any such thing as a "Book of Shadows" in his fictitious 1949 novel about mediaeval witchcraft, *High Magic's Aid*. High Priestess Doreen Valiente claimed that this was because at the time, Gardner had not yet conceived of the idea, and only invented it after writing his novel.

Valiente made the claim that Gardner found the term "Book of Shadows" from a 1949 edition (Volume I, Number 3) of a magazine known as The Occult Observer. In this edition, she claimed, was an advertisement for Gardner's novel, High Magic's Aid, which was opposite an article titled "The Book of Shadows" written by the palmist Mir Bashir. The article in question was about an allegedly ancient Sanskrit divination manual which explained how to foretell things based upon the length of a person's shadow.[3] Valiente theorised that Gardner then adopted this term for his Witches' grimoire. She maintained that "It was a good name, and it is a good name still, wherever Gardner found it".[3]

A typescript from a page of Ye Booke of Ye Art Magical

A leather bound manuscript written in Gardner's handwriting that was titled Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical was later found amongst his papers from the Museum after his death by Aidan Kelly[4] and was later obtained by Richard and Tamarra James of the Wiccan Church of Canada.[5] It appeared to be a first draft of Gardner's Book of Shadows, and featured sections based upon the rituals of Ordo Templi Orientis which had been devised by the occultist Aleister Crowley.[6] Gardner had gained access to these rituals in 1946, when he had purchased a charter from Crowley giving him permission to perform the OTO rituals.

Some people have taken this as evidence that Gardner invented the idea of a Witches' Grimoire, perhaps sometime between 1946 (when he finished his novel High Magic's Aid), and 1949, and had named it Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical. In 1949, he had renamed it to the Book of Shadows, and soon began to make use of it with his Bricket Wood Coven.

Adding weight to the evidence indicating Gardner invented the Book was that other Neopagan witches of the time, such as Robert Cochrane, never made use of such a book.
[7]

Valiente's rewriting

In 1953, Doreen Valiente joined Gardner's Bricket Wood coven, and soon rose to become its High Priestess. She noticed how much of the material in his Book of Shadows was taken not from ancient sources as Gardner had initially claimed, but from the works of the occultist Aleister Crowley, from Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches, from the Key of Solomon and also from the rituals of Freemasonry.[8] She confronted Gardner with this, who admitted that the text he had received from the New Forest coven had been fragmentary and he had had to fill much of it using various sources. He also stated that "well, if you think you can do any better, go ahead", [9] and Valiente thought that she could, later stating that:

I accepted the challenge and set out to rewrite the Book of Shadows, cutting out the Crowleyanity as much as I could and trying to bring it back to what I felt was, if not so elaborate as Crowley's phraseology, at least our own and in our own words.[9]

Valiente rewrote much of it, cutting out a lot of sections that had come from Crowley

(whose negative reputation she feared), though retaining parts that originated with Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches, which she felt was genuine witchcraft practice. Valiente dramatically rewrote sections such as the Charge of the Goddess and also wrote several poems for the book, such as The Witches Rune. She also helped to create a poem to include the Wiccan Rede within it.[10]

Valiente also noticed that a chant in one ritual in the book was based upon the poem "A Tree Song" from Puck of Pook's Hill by Rudyard Kipling, which she had enjoyed as a child.[11] The chant in question stated that:

Oh, do not tell the priest our plight,
Or he would call it sin;
But - we have been in the woods all night,
A-conjuring summer in !
And we bring you news by word of mouth -
Good news for cattle and corn -
Now is the Sun come up from the South,
With Oak, and Ash, and Thorn![12]
(These eight lines are exactly the final stanza of "A Tree Song".)

This version of the ritual, written by both Gardner and Valiente, but containing sections adopted from various sources, such as Aleister Crowley, Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches, and even Rudyard Kipling, went on to become the traditional text for Gardnerian Wicca.

In British Traditional Wicca

Main article: British Traditional Wicca

In forms of British Traditional Wicca, which include Gardnerian Wicca, Alexandrian Wicca and Algard Wicca, the Book of Shadows used by adherents is based upon that written by Gardner and Valiente.

Although his own book had been put together with the help of Doreen Valiente and included material from a variety of modern sources, (notably from Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches and the writings of Aleister Crowley) it also included sections written in an antique (or mock-antique) style, including advice for witches brought to trial and tortured. Gardner claimed that these sections were genuinely historical in origin, and that witches had not been allowed to write anything down until recently, to avoid incrimination; when at last Books of Shadows were allowed, the rituals and spells had to be written in a jumbled manner to prevent any non-initiate from using them.[13] More recent scholars however have doubted their authenticity.

It seems likely that Gardner told his three subsequent initiatory lines that the book should be copied word for word, and Wiccans descended from Eleanor Bone, Patricia Crowther and Monique Wilson have widely believed that the book was of ancient provenance.[13][14]

Contemporary usage

There sometimes exist two Books of Shadows kept by more traditional Wiccans, one being a coven book of core rituals and practises which remains unchanged and from which new initiates copy, and the second, intended for personal use, which differs from witch to witch and contains magical material collected by the initiate, such as astrology, herbal lore, and information regarding divination.[15]

Publication

After Gardner's death, his rival, Charles Cardell, published much of the material from the Gardnerian Book of Shadows. In the 1970s, the then Alexandrians Janet Farrar and Stewart Farrar decided, with the consent of Doreen Valiente, that much of the Gardnerian book should be published in its true form. Much of it was published by the Farrars in their 1984 book *The Witches' Way*.

In Eclectic Wicca

In non-traditional or "eclectic" forms of Wiccan or Neo-pagan practice, the term Book of Shadows is more often used to describe a personal journal, rather than a traditional text. This journal records rituals, spells, and their results, as well as other magical information. This can be either an individual or coven text, and is not normally passed from teacher to student. In many cases, this kind of Book of Shadows is an electronic document (disk or website) instead of a hand-written one. Some reserve the Book of Shadows for recording spells and keep a separate book, sometimes called the "Book of Mirrors", to contain thoughts, feelings and experiences.[16]

Other traditions

Not all traditions of Wicca utilize the term "Book of Shadows". In Seax-Wica, a tradition founded by Raymond Buckland, the Book of Shadows is called "The Tree", and in Devotional Wicca, the book is titled "The Book of Ways"; many traditions refer to their Books of Shadows as simply "The Book".

In popular culture

The television fantasy series *Charmed* features a fictional Book of Shadows which contains spells and arcane law, and has a supernatural ability to defend itself from harm. In the 1996 film *The Craft*, which some critics saw as a major influence on the series *Charmed*,[17][18] the Book of Shadows was referred to as an object in which a witch keeps her "power thoughts".

The 2000 sequel to *The Blair Witch Project* was titled *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* and featured a Wiccan character, despite there being no mention of a "Book of Shadows", during the film. But in the film's teaser trailer, reveals the "Book of Shadows" itself but never appeared in the film. In the trailer, the "Book of Shadows" was found by a half-naked woman with a twana symbol behind her back, at the woods of Black Hills, until she was attacked by an unknown man.[19] The title was seen as an attempt to capitalise on the *Charmed* series' established market.[20]

In the 2011 television series *The Secret Circle*, each family is shown to have their own "Book of Shadows", with each book containing unique spells. As the book is passed down from generation to generation, each generation appears to write their own spells or notes, as indicated by Cassie's recognition of her mother's handwriting in her own family's "Book of Shadows".

The Japanese horror adventure game *Corpse Party: Book of Shadows* deals with the eponymous book during its final chapter, in which it is revealed to be an actual Book of Shadows very much in keeping with the description in this article (albeit in the game, there is only one Book of Shadows that exists, containing a complete chronicle of all spells that exist in the entire world, be they Wiccan or not). The Book of Shadows returns in *Corpse Party: Blood Drive* where it becomes a key element to the story throughout the game.

In the Australian television series *Nowhere Boys* two characters are known to possess a Book of Shadows. One being one of the protagonists, Felix Ferne, and one being an antagonist, Alice Hartley. Felix's book was first thought to be his diary as he tried to hide its true existence from his friends, and Alice's book was thought to be her sister's.

In the fifth edition of roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*, members of the warlock class can gain a Book of Shadows, which enables them to learn extra spells and rituals regardless of whether or not such magic is ordinarily accessible through the warlock class.

In the roguelike video game *Binding of Isaac*, the Book of Shadows is featured as an active item the player can find. When used, it grants the player invulnerability which lasts for 10 seconds. It can be used multiple times as long as the player can recharge it by clearing hostile rooms/waves or by manually charging the item by other means.

See also

Universal Eclectic Wicca

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External links

The Gardnerian Book of Shadows

The Internet Book of Shadows

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Religious texts (List)

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Neopagan witchcraft

Categories: Texts used in WiccaBooks about magicDiariesGrimoiresReligious objects1970s in modern paganismMagic items

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What Is Chaos Magic? MCU's Strongest Powers Explained

Chaos magic is a modern, pragmatic occult system from the 1970s that treats belief as a tool, allowing practitioners (Chaos Magicians) to use any method—from ancient rituals to pop culture icons—to achieve results, focusing on what works rather than adhering to rigid dogma or deities, emphasizing personal power, adaptability, and belief as a malleable force.

Core Concepts

Belief as a Tool (Belief Flexibility): The central idea is that beliefs aren't fixed truths but tools to shape reality; a Chaos Magician can adopt any belief system (or none) temporarily to achieve a goal.

Pragmatism & Results-Oriented: Focuses on practical outcomes. If a technique, symbol, or deity from any system (shamanism, ceremonial magic, sci-fi) works, it's used.

Gnosis: An altered state of consciousness (trance, ecstasy, intense focus) where the conscious mind is quieted, allowing magical intent to bypass mental filters and manifest.

Sigils: Symbols created by the practitioner, charged with intent during gnosis, and then forgotten, allowing the subconscious to work on the goal.

Eclecticism: Blends diverse traditions (witchcraft, psychology, science, shamanism, pop culture) and creates new systems without strict hierarchies or complex rituals.

How it Works

Define Intent: Clearly state the desired outcome (e.g., finding a job, improving health).

Choose a Method: Select symbols, deities, or systems that resonate or seem effective (e.g., a Norse rune, a Gnostic angel, a made-up deity from a movie).

Achieve Gnosis: Enter an altered state, often through intense focus (chanting, drumming, meditation).

Charge the Sigil/Ritual: While in gnosis, activate the chosen symbol or perform the ritual, focusing energy on the intent.

Forget: Once charged, the symbol or ritual is deliberately forgotten (banned from the conscious mind) to allow the subconscious to work.

Observe Results: The belief in the method is discarded once the goal is met, allowing for new beliefs and techniques to be used next time.

Key Figures & Influences

Founders: Peter Carroll and Ray Sherwin (Illuminates of Thanateros - IOT).

Influences: Aleister Crowley, Austin Osman Spare, quantum physics, psychology, and various world religions.

Chaos magic - Wikipedia

Chaos magic teaches that the essence of magic is that perceptions are conditioned by beliefs, and that the world as it is normally...

Wikipedia

Article: Chaos Magic: The Misunderstood Path - Llewellyn

Jan 12, 2009 — Chaos magic is a "meta system," which means that it is a theoretical framework to fit other magical systems into, so t...

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Austin Osman Spare

Illuminates of Thanateros

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Can you feel the shift in your energy when you start casting? This phenomenon is also referred to as the gnostic state or gnosis. In chaos magick theory, gnosis is how you disseminate your magick. This flow state is different from your everyday mundane disposition and helps you access different parts of yourself and the divine. It helps you focus on your will and allowing your desire to pour out of it into your spellwork material. Before I start a spell or ritual I will take a few minutes and settle into this gnostic state—I usually do this through dance and music. But you can access it through breathwork, meditation, prayer, gentle movement, or focus. It's kind of like spellwork foreplay and it helps you have a truly elevated experience that will translate in the spellwork results.

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Do you think magic is real? I do. Not as fantasy, but as probability, attention, and intention shaping reality. Chaos magic is a modern, experimental approach rooted in science, psychology, and ritual. This post is my attempt to explain a bit about it. Curious what you think - would you try it? . Drop the comment "CHAOS" below if you're interested in learning more about the upcoming "Chaos Magic for Chaotic Times" online course.
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I've been a big fan of @fivefoldlaw's writing style for a long time over at his blog and it's great to see he's finally written a book, which I've long expected and anticipated. The Chaos Apple is a brilliantly irreverent crash course in making magic strange again. Thumper Forge brings the prankster spirit of Eris to life with sharp insight, grounded technique, and a clear understanding of Chaos Magic, Discordianism, and witchcraft. His writing is a joy; clever, candid, and disarmingly wise, making even the wildest concepts feel inviting and accessible. This book dares you to rethink and rewire your practice with purpose, play, and just the right dose of absurdity that garner real results. A really nice touch throughout the book are his "Discordian Dance Breaks" where those sections are printed upside down, which adds a nice touch to the book's overall vibe. A must-read for any witch ready to laugh, learn, and let go.
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Chaos magic, also spelled chaos magick,[1][2] is a modern tradition of magic.[3] Emerging in England in the 1970s as part of the wider neo-pagan and esoteric subculture,[4] it drew heavily from the occult beliefs of artist Austin Osman Spare, expressed several decades earlier.[3] It has been characterised as an invented religion,[5] with some commentators drawing similarities between the movement and Discordianism.[6] Magical organizations within this tradition include the Illuminates of Thanateros and Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth.

The founding figures of chaos magic believed that other occult traditions had become too religious in character.[7] They attempted to strip away the symbolic, ritualistic, theological, or otherwise ornamental aspects of these occult traditions, to leave behind a set of basic techniques that they believed to be the basis of magic.[8]

Chaos magic teaches that the essence of magic is that perceptions are conditioned by beliefs, and that the world as it is normally perceived can be changed by deliberately changing those beliefs.[9] Chaos magicians subsequently treat belief as a tool, often creating their own idiosyncratic magical systems and blending such different things as "practical magic, quantum physics, chaos theory, and anarchism."[10]

Scholar Hugh Urban has described chaos magic as a union of traditional occult techniques and applied postmodernism[11] – particularly a postmodernist skepticism concerning the existence or knowability of objective truth,[12] positing that chaos magic rejects the existence of absolute truth, and views all occult systems as arbitrary symbol-systems that are only effective because of the belief of the practitioner.[12]

History

Origins and influences (1900–1982)

Further information: Austin Osman Spare

Austin Osman Spare in 1904. His ideas formed the basis of chaos magic. Austin Osman Spare's work in the early to mid 1900s is largely the source of chaos magical theory and practice.[13] Specifically, Spare developed the use of sigils and the use of gnosis to empower them.[14][15] Although Spare died before chaos magic emerged, he has been described as the "grandfather of chaos magic".[16] Working during much the same period as Spare, Aleister Crowley's publications also provided a marginal yet early and ongoing influence, particularly for his syncretic approach to magic and his emphasis on experimentation and deconditioning.[17] Later, concurrent with the growth of religions such as Wicca in the 1950s and 1960s, different forms of magic became more common, some of which came in "explicitly disorganized, radically individualized, and often quite 'chaotic' forms".[18] In the 1960s and the decade that followed, Discordianism, the punk movement, postmodernism and the writings of Robert Anton Wilson emerged, and they were to become significant influences on the form that chaos magic would take.[19][20]

During the mid-1970s chaos magic appeared as "one of the first postmodern manifestations of occultism",^[14] built on the rejection of a need to adhere to a "single, systematized convention",^[21] and aimed at distilling magical practices down to a result-oriented approach rather than following specific practices based on tradition.^[22] An oft quoted line from Peter Carroll is "Magic will not free itself from occultism until we have strangled the last astrologer with the guts of the last spiritual master."^[23]

Peter J. Carroll and Ray Sherwin are considered to be the founders of chaos magic,^[10] although Phil Hine points out that there were others "lurking in the background, such as the Stoke Newington Sorcerors".^[24] Carroll was a regular contributor to *The New Equinox*, a magazine edited by Sherwin, and thus the two became acquainted.^{[24][25]}

In 1976-77 the first chaos magic organization Illuminates of Thanateros (IOT) was announced.^[26] The following year, 1978, was a seminal year in the origin of chaos magic, seeing the publication of both *Liber Null* by Carroll and *The Book of Results* by Sherwin – the first published books on chaos magic.^{[27][28]}

According to Carroll, "When stripped of local symbolism and terminology, all systems show a remarkable uniformity of method. This is because all systems ultimately derive from the tradition of Shamanism. It is toward an elucidation of this tradition that the following chapters are devoted."^[29]

Development and spread (1982–1994)

New chaos magic groups emerged in the early 1980s – at first, located in Yorkshire, where both Sherwin and Carroll were living. The early scene was focused on a shop in Leeds called *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, owned by Chris Bray. Bray also published a magazine called *The Lamp of Thoth*, which published articles on chaos magic, and his *Sorcerer's Apprentice Press* re-released both *Liber Null* and *The Book of Results*, as well as issuing *Psychonaut* and *The Theatre of Magic*.^[30] The "short-lived" Circle of Chaos, which included Dave Lee, was formed in 1982.^[31] The rituals of this group were published by Paula Pagani as *The Cardinal Rites of Chaos* in 1985.^[32]

Ralph Tegtmeier (Fratr U.:D.:), who ran a bookshop in Germany and was already practicing his own brand of "ice magick", translated *Liber Null* into German.^[31] Tegtmeier was inducted into the IOT in the mid-1980s, and later established the German section of the order.^[31]

As chaos magic spread, people from outside Carroll and Sherwin's circle began publishing on the topic. Phil Hine, along with Julian Wilde and Joel Biroco, published a number of books on the subject that were particularly influential in spreading chaos magic techniques via the internet.^[33]

In 1981, Genesis P-Orridge established Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY).^[34] P-Orridge had studied magic under William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin in the 1970s, and was also influenced by Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, as well as the

psychedelic movement.[35][33] TOPY practiced chaos magic alongside their other activities, and helped raise awareness of chaos magic in subcultures like the Acid house and Industrial music scenes.[36] Along with being an influence on P-Orridge, Burroughs was himself inducted into the IOT in the early 1990s.[37]

Pop culture: (1994–2000s)

From the beginning, chaos magic has had a tendency to draw on the symbolism of pop culture in addition to that of traditional magical systems; the rationale being that all symbol systems are equally arbitrary, and thus equally valid – the belief invested in them being the thing that matters.[38] The symbol of chaos, for example, was lifted from the fantasy novels of Michael Moorcock.[39]

Preluded by Kenneth Grant – who had studied with both Crowley and Spare, and who had introduced elements of H.P. Lovecraft's fictional Cthulhu mythos into his own magical writings[40] – there was a trend for chaos magicians to perform rituals invoking or otherwise dealing with entities from Lovecraft's work, such as the Great Old Ones. Hine, for example, published *The Pseudonomicon* (1994), a book of Lovecraftian rites. [14]

From 1994 to 2000, Grant Morrison wrote *The Invisibles* for DC Comics' Vertigo imprint, which has been described by Morrison as a "hypersigil": "a dynamic miniature model of the magician's universe, a hologram, microcosm or 'voodoo doll' which can be manipulated in real time to produce changes in the macrocosmic environment of 'real' life." [41] Both *The Invisibles* and the activities of Morrison herself were responsible for bringing chaos magic to a much wider audience in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the writer outlining their views on chaos magic in the "Pop Magic!" chapter of *A Book of Lies* (2003)[38] and a Disinfo Convention talk.[42]

Morrison's particular take on chaos magic exemplified the irreverent, pop cultural elements of the tradition, with Morrison arguing that the deities of different religions (Hermes, Mercury, Thoth, Ganesh, etc.) are nothing more than different cultural "glosses" for more universal "big ideas"[41] – and are therefore interchangeable: both with each other, and with other pop culture icons like The Flash, Metron, and Madonna. [41]

Post-chaos magic: 2010s

Alan Chapman – whilst praising chaos magic for "breathing new life" into Western occultism, thereby saving it from "being lost behind a wall of overly complex symbolism and antiquated morality" – has also criticised chaos magic for its lack of "initiatory knowledge": i.e., "teachings that cannot be learned from books, but must be transmitted orally, or demonstrated", present in all traditional schools of magic.[43] Innovations continue into the 2020s, as found in social media, fandoms, and webcomics.[44]

Beliefs, core concepts, and practices

Belief as a tool

The central defining tenet of chaos magic is arguably the idea that belief is a tool for achieving effects.[45] In chaos magic, complex symbol systems like Qabalah, the Enochian system, astrology or the I Ching are treated as maps or "symbolic and linguistic constructs" that can be manipulated to achieve certain ends but that have no absolute or objective truth value in themselves. Religious scholar Hugh Urban notes that chaos magic's "rejection of all fixed models of reality" reflects one of its central tenets: "nothing is true everything is permitted".[12]

Both Urban and religious scholar Bernd-Christian Otto trace this position to the influence of postmodernism on contemporary occultism.[12][46] Another influence comes from Spare, who believed that belief itself was a form of psychic energy that became locked up in rigid belief structures, and that could be released by breaking down those structures. This "free belief" could then be directed towards new aims.[citation needed] Otto has argued that chaos magic "filed away the whole issue of truth, thus liberating and instrumentalising individual belief as a mere tool of ritual practice."[47]

Magical paradigm shifting

Peter J. Carroll suggested assigning different worldviews to the sides of a dice, and then inhabiting the associated particular random paradigm for a set length of time when its number is rolled. For example, 1 might be paganism, 2 might be monotheism, 3 might be atheism, and so on.[12]

Phil Hine has stated that the primary task here is "to thoroughly decondition" the aspiring magician from "the mesh of beliefs, attitudes and fictions about self, society, and the world" that his or her ego associates with:

Our ego is a fiction of stable self-hood which maintains itself by perpetuating the distinctions of "what I am/what I am not, what I like/what I don't like", beliefs about ones politics, religion, gender preference, degree of free will, race, subculture etc all help maintain a stable sense of self.[48]

Cut-up technique

The cut-up technique is an aleatory literary technique in which a written text is cut up and rearranged, often at random, to create a new text. The technique can also be applied to other media such as film, photography, and audio recordings. It was pioneered by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs.[49]

Burroughs – who practiced chaos magic, and was inducted into the Illuminates of Thanateros in the early 1990s – was adamant that the technique had a magical function, stating, "the cut-ups are not for artistic purposes".[50] Burroughs used his cut-ups for "political warfare, scientific research, personal therapy, magical divination, and conjuration"[50] – the essential idea being that the cut-ups allowed the user to "break down the barriers that surround consciousness".[51] Burroughs stated:

I would say that my most interesting experience with the earlier techniques was the

realization that when you make cut-ups you do not get simply random juxtapositions of words, that they do mean something, and often that these meanings refer to some future event. I've made many cut-ups and then later recognized that the cut-up referred to something that I read later in a newspaper or a book, or something that happened... Perhaps events are pre-written and pre-recorded and when you cut word lines the future leaks out.[51]

David Bowie compared the randomness of the cut-up technique to the randomness inherent in traditional divinatory systems, like the I Ching or tarot.[52]

Genesis P-Orridge, who studied under Burroughs[53] described it as a way to "identify and short-circuit control, life being a stream of cut-ups on every level. They are a means to describe and reveal reality and the multi-faceted individual in which/from which reality is generated." [54]

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Chaos magic

Key concepts

Cut-up techniqueEgregoreEntheogensGnosisInitiationKiaPlaybackScryingSigilsSymbol of ChaosSynchronism

Notable figures

Genesis P-OrridgeGrant MorrisonLionel SnellPeter J. CarrollPhil HineRalph TegtmeierWilliam S. Burroughs

Influences

Aleister CrowleyAustin Osman SpareDiscordianismKenneth GrantPostmodernismRobert Anton Wilson

Organisations

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Magic and witchcraft

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Reddit

how Neville Goddard literally changed my reality - Reddit

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Knowing your name has a feeling of already being.

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Born

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Saint Michael, Barbados
Died
Oct 1, 1972
West Hollywood, CA

1:17:44

YouTube • Neville Goddard
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Neville Goddard

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Esophageal rupture
Joseph Murphy (writer)
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The Power of Awareness
1952

Feeling Is the Secret: (the Neville Goddard Collection: Book #4)

The Law and The Promise
1961

The Law And The Promise (Includes Rare Lecture, "Sami's Question."
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Learn to let go, trust the universe, and manifest your desires by occupying the state

where your desires already exist.

Neville Goddard - Talk To Yourself Like This For Just 3 Days

YouTube · Neville Goddard

Dec 6, 2024

YouTube · Neville Goddard

1:02:33

Neville Goddard teaches a powerful 3-day inner conversation technique to transform your world.

Neville Goddard - You Have To Find Out Who You Are

YouTube · Neville Goddard

Jul 6, 2025

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Neville Goddard teaches that you are the living manifestation of God, temporarily dwelling in human form. Your true identity is not your body, thoughts, or roles, but your eternal awareness.

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“Do not try to change people; they are only messengers telling you who you are.

Revalue yourself and they will confirm the change.”

The Power of Awareness, Neville Goddard

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Overview

Neville Goddard was a Barbadian writer, speaker and mystic. He grew up in Barbados and moved to the United States as a young adult. He taught various self-help methods for testing his own claim that the human imagination is omnificent, therefore God.

Wikipedia

Born: February 19, 1905, Saint Michael, Barbados

Died: October 1, 1972 (age 67 years), West Hollywood, CA

Children: Joseph Neville Goddard, Victoria Goddard

Parents: Joseph Nathaniel Goddard, Wilhelmina Goddard

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Neville Lancelot Goddard

Goddard c. 1939

Goddard c. 1939

Born February 19, 1905

Saint Michael, Barbados, British West Indies

Died October 1, 1972 (aged 67)

West Hollywood, California, US

Resting place Saint Michael, Barbados

Subject Self-help, Bible exegesis

Children Joseph Neville Goddard, Victoria Goddard

Neville Goddard (February 19, 1905 – October 1, 1972) was a Barbadian writer, speaker and mystic. He grew up in Barbados and moved to the United States as a young adult.

He taught various self-help methods for testing his own claim that the human imagination is omnificent, therefore God. He achieved popularity by reinterpreting the Bible and the poetry of William Blake.

Early life

Neville Lancelot Goddard was born in Fontabelle, Saint Michael, Barbados, on February 19, 1905, to Joseph Nathaniel Goddard, a merchant, and Wilhelmina Goddard (née Hinkson). Neville was the fourth of ten children. He was also the older brother to cricketer and businessman John Goddard.[1] At age 17, emigrated to New York City in 1922 to study drama and began his theatrical career as a dancer at the Hippodrome in New York City in 1925.[2][3]

Between 1929 and 1936, he was mentored by an Ethiopian Jew named Abdullah in New York. During this time, Abdullah introduced him to Kabbalah and taught him Hebrew.[3] New Thought author Joseph Murphy also acknowledged Abdullah as his teacher.[4]

In 1942, at the age of 37, Neville Goddard was drafted into the army and stationed at Camp Polk, Louisiana, in the 11th Armored Division. After serving just 9 months, he was granted an honorable discharge from his Battalion Commanding Officer Colonel Theodore Bilbough Jr. It was after this brief stint in the Army[5] that he was naturalized as a United States citizen, having been a British citizen up to this point.

Career

Goddard's earliest known career was as a professional dancer. While touring with his dance company in the UK, he developed an interest in metaphysics after he met Arthur Begbie, a Scotsman who introduced him to the world of psychical research, giving Neville his first taste of the spiritualistic seance. When he returned to New York he became associated with a Rosicrucian body.[2] In February 1938, he began lecturing in Old Actor's Church in New York.[2]

After traveling extensively throughout the United States, Neville eventually made his home in Los Angeles in 1952. In the early 1950s, Goddard lectured at The Town Hall on religious topics.[5] In his 1931 lecture "Imagination plus Faith", he spoke of his brief career in television, "I did just what I am doing now, they gave me a lectern, I simply sat at a desk and spoke". It was during the mid-1950s that he began his short stint on television. Broadcast in L.A. on channel 11 he had 26 half-hour shows which went on air between 2 pm and 2:30 pm every Sunday. The shows were simple in production, consisting of Goddard speaking extemporaneously to the television audience on biblical esotericism. The program averaged viewing audiences in excess of 300,000 on a weekly basis. The show was eventually cancelled when Channel 11 Studios were unable to secure advertisers suitable to the audience. In 1954, Goddard was reportedly planning a "metaphysical telefilm show", though it is unclear if the project came to fruition.[6] In the 1960s and early 1970s, he confined most of his lectures to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Miami.

Legacy

Jonathan L. Walton has contended that Frederick Eikerenkoetter, best known as

Reverend Ike, in particular adopted theories and teachings rooted in Goddard's ideas.[7] Rhonda Byrne and Wayne Dyer have noted that Goddard shaped their views.[8] Margaret Runyan Castaneda, ex-wife and later biographer of Carlos Castaneda, was interested in Goddard's work and introduced Castaneda to Goddard's ideas.[9]

Personal life

Goddard married Mildrid Mary Hughes in 1923. Hughes was born on March 29, 1901, in Lancaster and Blackburn, England, and died on November 9, 1979, in New York City. Goddard had one child with Hughes, a son named Joseph Neville Goddard, who was born on May 19, 1924 and died in March 1, 1986.[10]

In 1942, Goddard married Catherine Willa Van Schmus. Van Schmus was born on February 2, 1907, in New Jersey, and died on January 1, 1975, in Los Angeles, California. They had a daughter, Victoria Goddard, born on June 28, 1942,[11] and died on September 25, 2024 in Santa Monica, California.[12]

Death

Goddard died on October 1, 1972, aged 67, from an esophageal rupture. In 2022, historian Mitch Horowitz corrected the record of Neville's death, previously misattributed to a heart attack;[13] the author's death certificate cites the esophageal rupture.[14] He had been a resident of Los Angeles for roughly 20 years.[15]

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<https://icebluezen.com/neville-goddard-text-lecture-archive/>

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<https://nevillegoddardbooks.com/neville-goddard-text-lectures>

>Talk to AI Neville

<https://beta.character.ai/chat?>

char=LH59dBXc_pHj0PxDCVsb43orCvM6vqeRPuVDVNWD1gl

>Steve Pavlina's Explorer's Guide to Manifesting (also in the library)

<https://www.stevepavlina.com/resources/The-Explorers-Guide-to-Manifesting.pdf>

————FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS————

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>Manifesting And De-Manifesting:

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<https://pastebin.com/MzLX6gys>

>Getting into deep SATS (State Akin To Sleep)

<https://pastebin.com/QdfXJJQN>

>The Gateway Hemi-Sync Program (OLD, still usable but less complete)

<https://mega.nz/folder/uSZGCYCQ#-3miZdUvjf0W7zmBTL8C8Q>

>New Gateway Hemi-Sync Program (magnet also in the library)

<http://mgnet.me/.LoA>

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>Success Stories

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>Anon's imgur album
<https://imgur.com/a/ZMEgITS>

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Youtube channels recommendations in alphabetical order:

>100kwatt (Neville Goddard's original lectures)
https://www.youtube.com/c/100kwatt_Neville_Goddard

>Alpha Affirmations
<https://www.youtube.com/c/AlphaAffirmations>

>Be Something Wonderful
<https://www.youtube.com/c/BeSomethingWonderful>

>Bentinho Massaro
<https://www.youtube.com/c/BentinhoMassaro>

>Divine Imagination by Joseph Alai
<https://www.youtube.com/c/DivineImaginationbyJosephAlai>

>Edward Art Supply Hands
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCONxz4-oYekLXBsjPDvAnHQ>

>Elmer O. Locker Jr.
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>Giving Voice to the Wisdom of the Ages
<https://www.youtube.com/c/GivingVoicetotheWisdomoftheAges>

>Grave Mind
<https://www.youtube.com/c/GRAVEMINDunderground>

>Joseph Rodrigues
<https://www.youtube.com/c/JosephRodrigues>

>Master Key Society
<https://www.youtube.com/c/MasterKeySociety>

>Museum of Tarot
<https://www.youtube.com/c/MuseumOfTarot>

>Neville Goddess

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AI Overview

Nei Dan – Internal Alchemy – Sacred Path Medicine

Qigong and Neidan (Internal Alchemy) are intertwined Taoist practices for cultivating life energy (Qi), but Neidan is a more advanced, systematic path using Qigong as a foundation to transform Jing (essence), Qi, and Shen (spirit) into an internal elixir for spiritual immortality and union with the Tao, moving beyond basic health benefits to profound spiritual transformation. While Qigong focuses on circulation and physical health, Neidan uses deep meditation, visualization, and specific breathwork to refine these inner treasures, creating a higher-level internal substance.

Qigong (Qi Gong)

Focus: Moving and circulating Qi for health, balance, emotional control, and physical vitality.

Methods: Gentle movements, breathwork, and focused intention to open meridians and strengthen the body.

Goal: General well-being, healing, and building a strong energetic base.

Neidan (Inner Alchemy)

Focus: Cultivating and refining the "Three Treasures" (Jing, Qi, Shen) within the body to form an internal elixir.

Methods: More complex meditations, visualizations (like the Microcosmic Orbit), and specific energy work to transmute lower energies into higher spiritual states.

Goal: Spiritual realization, longevity, and becoming one with the Tao (immortality).

The Relationship: Qigong as Foundation for Neidan

Preparation: Qigong exercises are often the essential preparation for Neidan, clearing channels and building up Qi.

Progression: Neidan builds upon Qigong, taking the cultivated energy and consciousness to a deeper, more transformative level.

Differentiation: Think of Qigong as learning to use the tools, while Neidan is the systematic process of using those tools to create something profound.

Key Concepts in Neidan

The Three Treasures:

Jing (Essence): The fundamental life force, a person's inherited vitality.

Qi (Energy/Vitality): The dynamic life energy that flows through the body.

Shen (Spirit/Mind): Consciousness and spiritual awareness.

Microcosmic Orbit (Xiao Zhou Tian): Circulating Qi up the Governing Vessel (Du) and down the Conception Vessel (Ren).

Macrocosmic Orbit (Da Zhou Tian): Activating all eight extraordinary vessels, linking the entire meridian system.

Overview of Internal Alchemy in Taoism - Learn Religions

Jun 24, 2019 — Inner Alchemy or Neidan, a term often used synonymously with Qigong, is the Taoist art and science of gathering, stori...

Learn Religions

Neidan Qigong: Inner Alchemy Guide | PDF - Scribd

Neidan Qigong * Purging and Cleansing. Stand comfortably, feet under hips or together, arms, legs, and spine relaxed, breathing na...

Scribd

Neidan — Philosophy & Art Collaboratory

In China as elsewhere, Alchemy is a doctrine aiming to endeavor an understanding of the principles underlying the formation and fu...

philosophyandartcollaboratory.org

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Internal Alchemy - Nei Dan (内丹) Explained - Part 1

YouTube · Damo Mitchell - Lotus Nei Gong

Mar 18, 2022

YouTube · Damo Mitchell - Lotus Nei Gong

48:13

Alchemy is a western term given to nadan which is the internal practice of building a spiritual elixir.

Internal Taoist Alchemy - Qi Circulation #Qigong Practice

YouTube · Wudang Academy

Aug 21, 2020

YouTube · Wudang Academy

11:59

Learn internal alchemy qigong with stretching, circular motions, and breathing exercises to stimulate energy flow and strengthen your circular system.

Internal Alchemy (Neidan) – Chinese Taoist Meditations ...

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Nov 21, 2018

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Neidan: Internal Alchemy

Red Thread Qigong Institute

<https://redthreadinstitute.org> › learn › neidan-training-an...

Mar 15, 2025 — Neidan is an advanced progressive process with diverse and intensive practices. The desired outcomes range from significantly increasing personal levels of Qi.

What is the difference between Qigong, Meditation, and ...

Daoist Gate

<https://daoistgate.com> › Uncategorized

Inner Alchemy(Neidan) is a system of thought that combines Yangsheng and philosophy. (Neidan) is a kind of visual metaphor for the body's natural healing ...

Which is which: QiGong, NeiGong, WaiDan, Neidan (?)

The Dao Bums

<https://www.thedaobums.com> › ... › Daoist Discussion

Nov 20, 2013 — Qigong - Energy Work. Neigong - Focuses on internal methods

Alchemy - Focus on transmutation and/or transcendence Neidan - Alchemy which ...

What exactly is neidan/internal alchemy? - The Dao Bums

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Neidan vs Qigong - Daoist Discussion - The Dao Bums

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Nov 5, 2013

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Internal Alchemy (Nei Dan) in relation to Qigong (Qi Gong)

Inspirit Way

<https://inspiritway.com> › internal-alchemy

Sep 8, 2020 — In brief, the basic premise of Nei Dan is to cultivate an embodied spiritual reality. it is used to describe Martial Arts and Tai Qi sequences; ...

Key differences between Qigong and Neidan

yuxianpai.com

<https://yuxianpai.com> › 2021/08/16 › key-differences-b...

Aug 16, 2021 — The main difference between these Neidan and Qigong is that they work with absolutely different substances.

Overview of Internal Alchemy in Taoism

Learn Religions

<https://www.learnreligions.com> › ... › Taoism › Origins

Jun 25, 2019 — Inner Alchemy or Neidan, a term often used synonymously with Qigong, is the Taoist art and science of gathering, storing, and circulating the energies of the ...

Qigong & Neidan Online Courses: A Beginner's Guide

wu ji gong

<https://wuji-gong.org> › qigong-alchemy-neidan-online-...

Neidan, also known as internal alchemy, is a Taoist spiritual practice that focuses on cultivating and refining the inner energy, or qi, within the body.

Neidan — Philosophy & Art Collaboratory

philosophyandartcollaboratory.org

<https://philosophyandartcollaboratory.org> › neidan

Inner Alchemy is a technique of enlightenment, not much a doctrine but a practice achieved by exercising the techniques of longevity.

Nei Dan – Internal Alchemy

Sacred Path Medicine

<https://www.sacredpathmedicine.com> › neidan-daoist-int...

NeiDan can be called the highest form of Qigong as it is the most subtle and refined level of the internal practices. It is also called the “King of Medicine.” ...

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vipassana or breathing techniques/pranayama or CIA papers on Gateway Process

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AI Overview

Vipassana and Pranayama are distinct practices, while the declassified CIA "Gateway Process" paper is an analysis of a system that incorporates elements similar to both, using techniques like focused breathing to achieve altered states of consciousness.

Vipassana Meditation

Vipassana, meaning "to see things as they really are," is an ancient Buddhist meditation technique focused on insight and self-observation.

Techniques: Practitioners observe their natural breath and the physical sensations throughout their body in a non-judgmental way, without trying to change them. The goal is to notice the impermanence of all phenomena (thoughts, feelings, sensations).

Goal: To purify the mind, develop equanimity, and gain insight into the true nature of reality to achieve liberation from suffering.

Approach: It emphasizes passive, non-interfering observation of the present moment.

Pranayama (Yogic Breathing Techniques)

Pranayama is a set of yogic practices focused on the control and manipulation of the breath or "life force" (prana).

Techniques: Unlike Vipassana's passive observation, Pranayama involves actively regulating the breath using specific methods such as alternate nostril breathing (Nadi Sodhana), forceful exhalations (Kapalabhati), or the "ocean breath" (Ujjayi).

Goal: To balance energy, clear the mind, and create physical and mental benefits by influencing the nervous system (e.g., activating the relaxation response).

Approach: It is an active, tool-based method for harmonizing energy flow and preparing the mind for deeper yogic meditation.

The CIA Paper on the Gateway Process

The declassified 1983 CIA report, titled "Analysis and Assessment of the Gateway Process", is an analysis of a training system from the Monroe Institute designed to alter consciousness and potentially enable applications like intelligence gathering or "remote viewing".

Techniques: The system uses a combination of methods, including:

Focused breathing and muscle relaxation to convert physical energy into mental energy.

Hemi-Sync (hemispheric synchronization), an audio technique using binaural beats to synchronize the left and right brain hemispheres and induce specific brainwave patterns

(like theta and delta waves) associated with deep meditation and trance states.

Visualization and affirmation exercises to expand awareness and achieve "out-of-body" states, thereby transcending the limitations of time and space.

Goal: To boost brain power and facilitate a state of consciousness where the individual's awareness can be separated from physical reality and explore alternate dimensions or gather information non-locally.

Approach: The report attempts to provide a scientific framework, referencing quantum mechanics and holographic theory, to explain how these meditation-like practices could achieve such results. The document is available in the CIA's declassified reading room.

Summary of Relationship

The Gateway Process incorporates techniques that resemble elements of both Vipassana (focused internal awareness/body scan) and Pranayama (conscious manipulation of breath and energy) but frames them within a unique, scientifically speculative military/intelligence context focused on achieving extraordinary states of consciousness and psychic abilities, which is distinct from the traditional spiritual and psychological goals of the other two practices.

What is Vipassana?

* Introduction. The technique of Vipassana is a simple, practical way to achieve real peace of mind and to lead a happy, useful li...

vri.dhamma.org

3 Pranayama Breathing Techniques for Stress - Yoga Journal

May 20, 2025 — What Is Pranayama? Pranayama, which literally means “to extend the vital life force,” is an incredibly rich practice m...

Yoga Journal

Vipassana meditation: what it is, benefits & how to practice

Jan 6, 2025 — What to know: Vipassana meditation focuses on personal insight over relaxation, and helps you observe thoughts, emot...

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ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF GATEWAY PROCESS

CIA (.gov)

<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/cia-...>

PDF

Yoga, zen or transcendental meditation, if practiced long enough, will produce a change in the sound frequency with which the human heart resonates ...

29 pages

Missing: vipassana breathing

ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF GATEWAY PROCESS

CIA (.gov)

<https://www.cia.gov/cia-rdp96-00788r001700210016-5>

The next technique is called color breathing and is Approved For Release 2003/09/10 designed to use the expanded awareness and highly focused attentiveness

Missing: vipassana | Show results with: vipassana

The CIA Used This Psychic Meditation Program. It's Never ...

WIRED

<https://www.wired.com/culture/military>

Nov 5, 2025 — “The Gateway Tapes”—a set of guided meditations intended to help people reach new planes of consciousness—the self-hypnosis style exercises ...

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The Gateway Process: How the CIA Tried to Hack Human ...

Popular Mechanics

<https://www.popularmechanics.com/.../consciousness>

Sep 18, 2025 — Through breathing exercises, chanting, singing, and repetitive poses, Kundalini yoga is supposed to help you shed your ego—a concept aligned ...

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CIA "Gateway Process" says we can breathe energy up our ...

Reddit · r/gatewaytapes

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The Gateway Process is a training system developed by The Monroe Institute that uses meditation-like techniques combined with sound technology ...

Magick and the CIA (the Gateway Process) : r ...

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In 1983, The CIA Wrote A Bizarre Report About ...

IFLScience

<https://www.iflscience.com/in-1983-the-cia-wrote-a-bi...>

Mar 11, 2021 — The CIA wrote an obscure report looking to the “Gateway Experience,” claiming that an altered state of human consciousness may be able to transcend space and ...

MONROE INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCES

CIA (.gov)

<https://www.cia.gov> › readingroom › docs › CIA...

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Originally named the M-5000, it is now called the Gateway Program. The present Gateway Session is a distant cousin of the first, to say the least. Much of the ...

16 pages

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The CIA Study On Manifestation - by Sofia Alherani

Medium · Sofia Alherani

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Breathing Enhanced Brain Function: The Gateway Process can potentially enhance cognitive functions, such as problem-solving, creativity, and ...

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Can the CIA Teach You How to Manifest?

ELLE

<https://www.elle.com> › Beauty › Health & Fitness

Mar 27, 2024 — The CIA released 20-year-old documents relating to the Gateway Process, a training technique that used sound frequencies to stimulate the brain to achieve ...

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The CIA On Time Travel And The Holographic Reality - The ...

YouTube · Brian Scott

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The “Analysis and Assessment of Gateway Process” was declassified by the CIA in 2017 This Gateway Process was a meditation lesson that ...

25 key moments in this video

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AI Overview

Sadhus Men Sadhus are ascetic men in Hindu tradition who ...

Sadhu and Sannyasi traditions involve ascetic life, renouncing worldly ties for spiritual realization through severe discipline, meditation, and detachment, characterized by distinctive appearances (saffron robes, ash), vows (celibacy, non-possession), and practices like wandering (Bahudaka), living in solitude (Kutichaka), or extreme austerities (Naga Sadhus), all focused on achieving moksha (liberation). They are revered but distinct from priests, representing a life beyond family and society, often undertaking intense tapas (austerities) and adhering to strict vows, says this Facebook post.

Core Principles & Vows

Renunciation: Abandoning family, possessions, and societal norms (marriage, career) for spiritual pursuit.

Austerity (Tapas): Extreme self-discipline, meditation, and practices to control senses.

Celibacy (Brahmacharya): Strict abstention from sexual activity.

Non-Possession (Aparigraha): Minimizing or renouncing material wants.

Truthfulness & Non-violence (Ahimsa): Key ethical guidelines.

Appearance & Lifestyle

Clothing/Body: Often wear saffron robes, smear ash (symbolizing death to the world), or go naked (Naga Sadhus).

Possessions: Carry minimal items, like a begging bowl, staff, or water pot, says this Facebook post.

Lifestyle: Can be itinerant (Bahudaka), solitary (Kutichaka), or deeply ascetic (Paramahansa), focusing on self-realization (Brahman).

Paths & Orders

Vedic Progression: Some follow stages of life, while others choose outright renunciation.

Initiation: Involves name changes, dedication to a deity (Shiva, Vishnu), and learning from a guru.

Types: Includes diverse orders like Shaivite (trident bearers) and Vaishnavite, with specific groups like Naga Sadhus performing extreme rituals (e.g., at Kumbh Mela).

Role in Society

Spiritual Guides: Offer teachings, spiritual merit, and a path to liberation.

Ambivalence: While respected, they represent detachment, making them inauspicious at events like weddings, notes this Religion Facts article.

sadhu - Religion Facts

Mar 16, 2015 — If he is a Saiva, he might impersonate Siva and carry a trident (trisula), denoting empire and the irresistible force ...

ReligionFacts

What is the difference between sannyasi, ashram, and sadhu orders ...

Jan 29, 2024 — The four detached ones wear similar saffron robes and kaupinas (loincloths). * Kutichaka: A life with little contact w...

Facebook

Sadhu - Encyclopedia.com

May 13, 2018 — Marriage and Family. The renunciation of family life and the married state are characteristic of the ascetic life. It ...

Encyclopedia.com

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Sannyasa

Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sannyasa>

Sannyasa is traditionally conceptualized for men or women in the last years of their life, but young brahmacharis have the choice to skip the householder and retirement stages, renounce worldly and materialistic pursuits and dedicate their lives to spiritual pursuits.

Photograph of a Sanyasi ascetic, albumen print, by ...

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The sadhus: the holy men of India

Intuitive Flow

<https://www.intuitiveflow.com> › Newsletters

Mar 18, 2015 — The sadhus need to renounce their life, name and previous identity. Afterwards, a ritual is performed, during which they shave all the hair on their body, (including their head,) followed by a holy bath.

Sanyasi /Sadhus of Varanasi - Shikha Saxena - Medium

Medium · Shikha Saxena

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Sadhus dress in saffron colored clothing and mark forehead with Trident mark called “Tripundra” and live monastic life.

sadhu Sanyasi traditions from shikhasaxena-82230.medium.com

Videos

Who Are Naga Sadhus? Where Do They Come From? How ...

YouTube · India Today

Jan 29, 2025

YouTube · India Today

4:40

Naga sadhus are Shiva worshippers who renounce worldly pleasures and live in the Himalayas. They become Naga sadhus through a long process during the Kumbh Mela.

Who Are The Naga Sadhus? Highlight Of The Maha Kumbh

YouTube · India Today

Jan 14, 2025

YouTube · India Today

4:37

Naga Sadhus, India's warrior saints, lead mysterious lives, practicing austerities, and disappearing into seclusion between major festivals.

DID YOU KNOW? | Sadhguru is a Naga Sadhu | His Role as a ...

YouTube · Sadhguru Darshan

Jan 25, 2025

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Naga sadhus are not for talking, they focus on profoundness of experience and liberation, not impactfulness of action.

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ReligionFacts

<https://religionfacts.com> › sadhu

Mar 17, 2015 — Sadhus usually have only the possessions they carry with them: a staff (danda), a waterpot (kamandalu), an alms bowl, a rosary, and perhaps an extra cloth or a fire tong. Symbols and Ritual Items. The typical Hindu ascetic (sadhu) usually wears a distinctive mark (pundra) on his forehead and often ...

Who should actually become a sadhu/sannyasi?

Reddit · r/AdvaitaVedanta

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Who is actually worthy of taking the path of renunciation/sannyasa, and who should avoid that path and just perform their duties as a house holder?

Difference amongst Rishi, Sadhu, Saint, Muni ...

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Can anyone Define Sanyasi, Santh, Pandit, Guru ...

17 answers

Mar 18, 2023

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Sadhu and Swami

New World Encyclopedia

<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org> › entry › Sadh...

In Hinduism, the terms Sadhu, Swami and Sannyasi refer to renunciates and spiritual masters, who have usually left behind all material attachments to live in forests, temples and caves all over India. The word "Sadhu" is the general term for a Hindu ascetic who has given up the pursuit of the first three Hindu ...

Historical View of the Swami Tradition (Sanyasa)

AhymSin

<https://www.ahymSin.org> › historical-view-of-the-swami-...

Aug 7, 2022 — Sanyasins have to be fed by grihasthas, the householder during that 25-year period when they earn and earn more. The Vedic injunction is to ...

What religious roles do the terms sadhu, sannyasi, and ...

Papertrell

<https://www.papertrell.com> › apps › preview › content

Some sadhus are also sannyasis, renunciants officially initiated into this spiritual status by a guru. Individuals may formally enter into the state of sannyasa for various reasons according to tradition: a spontaneous quest for spiritual liberation; a quest resulting from more deliberate immersion ...

What is the difference between a Rishi, Sadhu, Saint, Muni ...

The Times of India

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com> › ... › soul-search

Feb 13, 2025 — They take vows of celibacy, live a simple life, and focus solely on God. Famous Sanyasis include Adi Shankaracharya and Swami Vivekananda. "Sanyasi - सं + न्यासि (complete renouncer)," signifying one who has given up everything ...

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"Sanyasi" redirects here. For the films, see [Sanyasi \(1945 film\)](#) and [Sanyasi \(1975 film\)](#).

Photograph of a Sanyasi ascetic, albumen print, by Captain W. W. Hooper & Surgeon G. Western, Hyderabad, c. 1865

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[vte](#)

Sannyasa (Sanskrit: संन्यास, romanized: saṃnyāsa), sometimes spelled *sanyasa*, is the fourth stage within the Hindu system of four life stages known as *ashramas*, the first three being *brahmacharya* (celibate student), *grihastha* (householder) and *vanaprastha* (forest dweller, retired).[1] Sannyasa is traditionally conceptualized for men or women in the last years of their life, but young *brahmacharis* have the choice to skip the householder and retirement stages, renounce worldly and materialistic pursuits and dedicate their lives to spiritual pursuits.

Sannyasa, a form of asceticism marked by renunciation of material desires and prejudices, is characterized by a state of uninterest in and detachment from material life, with the purpose of spending one's life in peaceful, spiritual pursuits.[2][3] An individual in Sanyasa is known as a *sannyasi* (male) or *sannyasini* (female) in Hinduism.[note 1] Sannyasa shares similarities with the *Sadhu* and *Sadhvi* traditions of Jain monasticism, and the *sannyasi* and *sannyasini* share similarity with the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* of Buddhism.[5]

Sannyasa has historically been a stage of renunciation, *ahimsa* (non-violence), a peaceful and simple life and spiritual pursuit in Indian traditions. However, this has not always been the case. After the invasions and establishment of Muslim rule in India,

from the 12th century through the British Raj, parts of the Shaiva (Gossain) and Vaishnava (Bairagi) ascetics metamorphosed into a military order, where they developed martial arts, created military strategies, and engaged in guerrilla warfare.[6] These warrior sanyasi (ascetics) played an important role in helping European colonial powers establish themselves in the Indian subcontinent.[7]

Etymology and synonyms

Samnyāsa: in Sanskrit nyasa means 'purification', sannyasa means "Purification of Everything".[8] It is a composite word of sam- which means "together, all", ni- which means "down" and āsa from the root as, meaning "to throw" or "to put".[9] A literal translation of Samnyāsa is thus "to put down everything, all of it". Sannyasa is sometimes spelled as Sanyasa.[9]

The term Samnyasa makes appearance in the Samhitas, Aranyakas and Brahmanas, the earliest layers of Vedic literature (2nd millennium BCE), but it is rare.[10] It is not found in ancient Buddhist or Jaina vocabularies, and only appears in Hindu texts of the 1st millennium BCE, in the context of those who have given up ritual activity and taken up non-ritualistic spiritual pursuits discussed in the Upanishads.[10] The term Sannyasa evolves into a rite of renunciation in ancient Sutra texts, and thereafter became a recognized, well discussed stage of life (Ashrama) by about the 3rd and 4th century CE. [10]

Sanyasis are also known as Bhiksu, Pravrajita/Pravrajitā,[11] Yati,[12] Sramana and Parivrajaka in Hindu texts.[10]

History

Adi Shankara, founder of Advaita Vedanta, with disciples, by Raja Ravi Varma (1904) Jamison and Witzel state[13] early Vedic texts make no mention of Sannyasa, or Ashrama system, unlike the concepts of Brahmacharin and Grihastha which they do mention.[14] Instead, Rig Veda uses the term Antigriha (अन्तिगृह) in hymn 10.95.4, as still a part of the extended family, where older people lived in ancient India, with an outwardly role.[13] It is in later Vedic era and over time, that Sannyasa and other new concepts emerged, while older ideas evolved and expanded. A three-stage Ashrama concept, along with Vanaprastha, emerged about or after 7th Century BC, when sages such as Yājñavalkya left their homes and roamed around as spiritual recluses and pursued their Pravrajika (wanderer) lifestyle.[15] The explicit use of the four-stage Ashrama concept appeared a few centuries later.[13][16]

However, early Vedic literature from 2nd millennium BC mentions Muni (मुनि, monks, mendicants, holy men), with characteristics that mirror those found in later Sannyasins and Sannyasinis. For example, the Rig Veda, in Book 10 Chapter 136, mentions Munis as those with Kesin (केशिन्, long haired) and Mala clothes (मल, soil-colored, yellow, orange, saffron), engaged in the affairs of Mananat (mind, meditation).[17] The Rigveda,

however, refers to these people as Muni and Vati (वति, monks who beg).

केश्यग्निं केशी विषं केशी बिभर्ति रोदसी । केशी विश्वं स्वर्दृशे केशीदं ज्योतिरुच्यते ॥१॥ मुनयो वातरशनाः पिशङ्गा वसते मला । वातस्यानु ध्राजिं यन्ति यद्देवासो अविक्षत ॥२॥

He with the long loose locks (of hair) supports Agni, and moisture, heaven, and earth; He is all sky to look upon: he with long hair is called this light. The Munis, girdled with the wind, wear garments of soil hue; They, following the wind's swift course, go where the Gods have gone before.

—Rig Veda, Hymn 10.CXXXVI.1-2[17]

These Munis, their lifestyle and spiritual pursuit, likely influenced the Sannyasa concept, as well as the ideas behind the ancient concept of Brahmacharya (bachelor student). One class of Munis were associated with Rudra.[18] Another were Vratyas.[citation needed]

Lifestyle and goals

A Hindu monk walking during sunrise in a mango garden in Dinajpur, Bangladesh

A Hindu Sannyasi. In ancient and medieval literature, they are usually associated with forests and remote hermitages in their spiritual, literary and philosophical pursuits. Hinduism has no formal demands nor requirements on the lifestyle or spiritual discipline, method or deity a Sanyasin or Sanyasini must pursue – it is left to the choice and preferences of the individual.[19] This freedom has led to diversity and significant differences in the lifestyle and goals of those who adopt Sannyasa. There are, however, some common themes. A person in Sannyasa lives a simple life, typically detached, itinerant, drifting from place to place, with no material possessions or emotional attachments. They may have a walking stick, a book, a container or vessel for food and drink, often wearing yellow, saffron, orange, ochre or soil colored clothes. They may have long hair and appear disheveled, and are usually vegetarians.[19] Some minor Upanishads as well as monastic orders consider women, children, students, fallen men (those with a criminal record) and others as not qualified to become Sannyasa; while other texts place no restrictions.[20] The dress, the equipage and lifestyle varies between groups. For example, Sannyasa Upanishad in verses 2.23 to 2.29, identifies six lifestyles for six types of renunciates.[21] One of them is described as living with the following possessions,[22]

Pot, drinking cup and flask – the three supports, a pair of shoes, a patched robe giving protection – in heat and cold, a loin cloth, bathing drawers and straining cloth, triple staff and coverlet.

—Sannyasa Upanishad, 1.4[22]

Those who enter Sannyasa may choose whether they join a group (similar to Christian

mendicant orders). Some are anchorites, homeless mendicants preferring solitude and seclusion in remote parts, without affiliation.[23] Others are cenobites, living and traveling with kindred fellow-Sannyasi in the pursuit of their spiritual journey, sometimes in Ashramas or Matha/Sangha (a Hermitage, the practice of seclusion known generally as monasticism).[23]

Most Hindu ascetics adopt celibacy when they begin Sannyasa. However, there are exceptions, such as the Saiva Tantra school of asceticism where ritual sex is considered part of liberation process.[24] Sex is viewed by them as a transcendence from a personal, intimate act to something impersonal and ascetic.[24]

The goal

The goal of the Hindu Sannyasin is moksha (liberation).[25][26] The idea of what that means varies from tradition to tradition.

Who am I, and in what really do I consist? What is this cage of suffering?

—Jayakhya Samhita, Verse 5.7[24]

For the Bhakti (devotion) traditions, liberation consists of being an eternal servant to the Divine and release from Saṃsāra (rebirth in future life);[27] for Yoga traditions, liberation is the experience of the highest Samādhi (deep awareness in this life);[28] and for the Advaita tradition, liberation is jivanmukti – the awareness of the Supreme Reality (Brahman) and Self-realization in this life.[29][30] Sannyasa is a means and an end in itself. It is a means to decreasing and then ultimately ending all ties of any kind. It is a means to the soul and meaning, but not ego nor personalities. Sannyasa does not abandon the society, it abandons the ritual mores of the social world and one's attachment to all its other manifestations.[31] The end is a liberated, content, free and blissful existence.[32][33]

The behaviors and characteristics

The behavioral state of a person in Sannyasa is described by many ancient and medieval era Indian texts. Bhagavad Gita discusses it in many verses, for example:[34]

ज्ञेयः स नित्यसंन्यासी यो न द्वेष्टि न काङ्क्षति । निर्द्वन्द्वो हि महाबाहो सुखं बन्धात्प्रमुच्यते ॥५-३॥

He is known as a permanent Sannyasin who does not hate, does not desire, is without dualities (opposites). Truly, Mahabaho (Arjuna), he is liberated from bondage.

—Bhagavad Gita, Hymn 5.3[34]

Other behavioral characteristics, in addition to renunciation, during Sannyasa include: ahimsa (non-violence), akrodha (not become angry even if you are abused by others), disarmament (no weapons), chastity, bachelorhood (no marriage), avyati (non-desirous), amati (poverty), self-restraint, truthfulness, sarvabhutahita (kindness to all creatures), asteya (non-stealing), aparigraha (non-acceptance of gifts, non-possessiveness) and

shaucha (purity of body, speech and mind).[35][36] Some Hindu monastic orders require the above behavior in form of a vow, before a renunciate can enter the order.[35] Tiwari notes that these virtues are not unique to Sannyasa, and other than renunciation, all of these virtues are revered in ancient texts for all four Ashrama (stage) of human life.[37]

Baudhayana Dharmasūtra, completed by about 7th century BC, states the following behavioral vows for a person in Sannyasa[38]

These are the vows a Sannyasi must keep –

Abstention from injuring living beings, truthfulness, abstention from appropriating the property of others, abstention from sex, liberality (kindness, gentleness) are the major vows. There are five minor vows: abstention from anger, obedience towards the guru, avoidance of rashness, cleanliness, and purity in eating. He should beg (for food) without annoying others, any food he gets he must compassionately share a portion with other living beings, sprinkling the remainder with water he should eat it as if it were a medicine.

—Baudhayana, Dharmasūtra, II.10.18.1-10[38]

Types

Ashrama Upanishad identified various types of Sannyasi renouncers based on their different goals:[39] Kutichaka – seeking atmospheric world; Bahudaka – seeking heavenly world; Hamsa – seeking penance world; Paramahamsa – seeking truth world; and Turiyatitas and Avadhutas seeking liberation in this life.

In some texts, such as Sannyasa Upanishad,[21] these were classified by the symbolic items the Sannyasins carried and their lifestyle. For example, Kutichaka sannyasis carried triple staffs, Hamsa sannyasis carried single staffs, while Paramahamsas went without them. This method of classification based on emblematic items became controversial, as anti-thematic to the idea of renunciation. Later texts, such as Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad stated that all renunciation is one, but people enter the state of Sannyasa for different reasons – for detachment and getting away from their routine meaningless world, to seek knowledge and meaning in life, to honor rites of Sannyasa they have undertaken, and because he already has liberating knowledge.[40]

Other classifications

There were many groups of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist Sannyasis co-existing in pre-Maurya Empire era, each classified by their attributes, such as:[41] Achelakas (Śvetāmbara Jainas without clothes), Ajivika, Aviruddhaka, Devadhammika, Eka-satakas (Śvetāmbara Jainas with 1 cloth), Gotamaka, Jatilaka, Magandika, Mundasavaka, Nigrantha (Śvetāmbara Jainas), Paribbajaka, Tedandikas, Titthiya, Santrottar (Śvetāmbara Jainas with 2 or more clothes) and others.

Literature

Swami Vivekananda (1894) was a sannyasi.

The Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras, composed about mid 1st millennium BC and later, place increasing emphasis on all four stages of Ashrama system including Sannyasa.[42] The Baudhayana Dharmasūtra, in verses 2.11.9 to 2.11.12, describes the four Ashramas as "a fourfold division of Dharma".[42] The newer Dharmaśāstra vary widely in their discussion of Ashrama system .[43]

The Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras give a number of detailed but widely divergent guidelines on renunciation. In all cases, Sannyasa was never mandatory and was one of the choices before an individual. Only a small percentage chose this path. Olivelle[43] posits that the older Dharmasūtras present the Ashramas including Sannyasa as four alternative ways of life and options available, but not as sequential stage that any individual must follow.[42] Olivelle also states that Sannyasa along with the Ashrama system gained mainstream scholarly acceptance about 2nd century BC.[44]

Ancient and medieval era texts of Hinduism consider Grihastha (householder) stage as the most important of all stages in sociological context, as human beings in this stage not only pursue a virtuous life, they produce food and wealth that sustains people in other stages of life, as well as the offspring that continues mankind.[1][45] However, an individual had the choice to renounce any time he or she wanted, including straight after student life.[46]

When can a person renounce?

Baudhayana Dharmasūtra,[47] in verse II.10.17.2 states that anyone who has finished Brahmacharya (student) life stage may become ascetic immediately, in II.10.17.3 that any childless couple may enter Sannyasa anytime they wish, while verse II.10.17.4 states that a widower may choose Sannyasa if desired, but in general, states verse II.10.17.5, Sannyasa is suited after the completion of age 70 and after one's children have been firmly settled.[47] Other texts suggest the age of 75.[48]

The Vasiṣṭha and Āpastamba Dharmasūtras, and the later Manusmṛti describe the āśramas as sequential stages which would allow one to pass from Vedic studentship to householder to forest-dwelling hermit to renouncer.[49] However, these texts differ with each other. Yājñavalkya Smṛti, for example, differs from Manusmṛti and states in verse 3.56 that one may skip Vanaprastha (forest dwelling, retired) stage and go straight from the Grihastha (householder) stage to Sannyasa.

Who may renounce?

The Jabala Upanishad mentions one who gets vairagya of any class or gender can renounce or take sanyasa.[50] Nevertheless, Dharmaśāstra texts document people of all castes as well as women, entered Sannyasa in practice.[51]

What happened to renunciators' property and human rights?

After renouncing the world, the ascetic's financial obligations and property were

adjudicated by the state, in the manner of a decedent's estate.[52] Viṣṇu Smṛiti in verse 6.27, for example, states that if a debtor takes Sannyasa, his sons or grandsons should settle his debts.[53] As to the little property a Sannyasin may collect or possess after renunciation, Book III Chapter XVI of Kautiliya's Arthashastra states that the property of hermits (vānaprastha), ascetics (yati, sannyasa), and student bachelors (Brahmachāri) shall on their death be taken by their guru, disciples, their dharmabhratri (brother in the monastic order), or classmates in succession.[54]

Although a renouncer's practitioner's obligations and property rights were reassigned, he or she continued to enjoy basic human rights such as the protection from injury by others and the freedom to travel. Likewise, someone practicing Sannyasa was subject to the same laws as common citizens; stealing, harming, or killing a human being by a Sannyasi were all serious crimes in Kautiliya's Arthashastra.[55]

Renunciation in daily life

Later Indian literature debates whether the benefit of renunciation can be achieved (moksha, or liberation) without asceticism in the earlier stages of one's life. For example, Bhagavad Gita, Vidyaranya's Jivanmukti Viveka, and others believed that various alternate forms of yoga and the importance of yogic discipline could serve as paths to spirituality, and ultimately moksha.[56][57] Over time, four paths to liberating spirituality have emerged in Hinduism: Jñāna yoga, Bhakti yoga, Karma yoga and Rāja yoga.[58] Acting without greed or craving for results, in Karma yoga for example, is considered a form of detachment in daily life similar to Sannyasa. Sharma[59] states that, "the basic principle of Karma yoga is that it is not what one does, but how one does it that counts and if one has the know-how in this sense, one can become liberated by doing whatever it is one does", and "(one must do) whatever one does without attachment to the results, with efficiency and to the best of one's ability".[59]

Warrior ascetics

The Mughal Army commanded by Akbar attack members of the Sannyasa during the Battle of Thanesar, 1567

Ascetic life was historically a life of renunciation, non-violence and spiritual pursuit. However, in India, this has not always been the case. For example, after the Mongol and Persian Islamic invasions in the 12th century, and the establishment of Delhi Sultanate, the ensuing Hindu-Muslim conflicts provoked the creation of a military order of Hindu ascetics in India.[6][7] These warrior ascetics formed paramilitary groups called Akharas and they invented a range of martial arts.[6]

Nath Siddhas of the 12th century AD, may have been the earliest Hindu monks to resort to a military response after the Muslim conquest.[60] Ascetics, by tradition, led a nomadic and unattached lifestyle. As these ascetics dedicated themselves to rebellion, their groups sought stallions, developed techniques for spying and targeting, and they adopted strategies of war against Muslim nobles and the Sultanate state. Many of these groups were devotees of Hindu deity Mahadeva, and were called Mahants.[6] Other

popular names for them was Sannyasis, Yogis, Nagas (followers of Shiva), Bairagis (followers of Vishnu) and Gosains from the 16th to the 19th centuries; in some cases, these Hindu monks cooperated with Muslim fakirs who were Sufi and also persecuted. [7]

Warrior monks continued their rebellion through the Mughal Empire, and became a political force during the early years of British Raj notably the Sannyasi rebellion (1763-1800). In some cases, these regiments of soldier monks shifted from guerrilla campaigns to war alliances, and these Hindu warrior monks played a key role in helping British establish themselves in India.[61] The significance of warrior ascetics rapidly declined with the consolidation of British Raj in late 19th century, and with the rise in non-violence movement by Mahatma Gandhi.[6]

Novetzke states that some of these Hindu warrior ascetics were treated as folk heroes, aided by villagers and townspeople, because they targeted figures of political and economic power in a discriminatory state, and some of these warriors paralleled Robin Hood's lifestyle.[62]

Upanishads

Sannyasa, or the renunciant way of life, is discussed in various Upanishads.

Major Upanishads

Among the thirteen major or Principal Upanishads, all from the ancient era, many include sections related to Sannyasa.[63] The Mundaka Upanishad discusses the path of Sannyasa as a means to attain spiritual knowledge and liberation. It emphasizes the renunciant's simple and austere lifestyle in pursuit of wisdom.[64] The motivations and state of a Sannyasi are mentioned in Maitrāyaṇi Upanishad, a classical major Upanishad that Robert Hume included among his list of "Thirteen Principal Upanishads" of Hinduism.[64] Maitrāyaṇi starts with the question, "given the nature of life, how is joy possible?" and "how can one achieve moksha (liberation)?" in later sections it offers a debate on possible answers and its views on Sannyasa.[65]

In this body infected with passions, anger, greed, delusion, fright, despondency, grudge, separation from what is dear and desirable, attachment to what is not desirable, hunger, thirst, old age, death, illness, sorrow and the rest - how can one experience only joy? – Hymn I.3

The drying up of great oceans, the crumbling down of the mountains, the instability of the pole-star, the tearing of the wind-chords, the sinking down, the submergence of the earth, the tumbling down of the gods from their place - in a world in which such things occur, how can one experience only joy ?! – Hymn I.4

—Maitrayaniya Upanishad, Translated by Paul Deussen[66]

Dragged away and polluted by the river of the Gunas (personality), one becomes rootless, tottering, broken down, greedy, uncomposed and falling in the delusion of I-

consciousness, he imagines: "I am this, this is mine" and binds himself, like a bird in the net. – Hymn VI.30

Just as the fire without fuel comes to rest in its place,
so also the passive mind comes to rest in its source;
When it (mind) is infatuated by the objects of sense, he falls away from truth and acts;
Mind alone is the Samsara, one should purify it with diligence;
You are what your mind is, a mystery, a perpetual one;
The mind which is serene, cancels all actions good and bad;
He, who, himself, serene, remains steadfast in himself - he attains imperishable
happiness. – Hymn VI.34

—Maitrayaniya Upanishad, Translated by Paul Deussen[67]

Sannyasa Upanishads

Of the 108 Upanishads of the Mukṭika, the largest corpus is dedicated to Sannyasa and to Yoga, or about 20 each, with some overlap. The renunciation-related texts are called the Sannyasa Upanishads.[68] These are as follows:

Veda Sannyāsa

Ṛigveda Nirvāṇa

Samaveda Āruṇeya, Maitreya, Sannyāsa, Kuṇḍika

Krishna Yajurveda Brahma, Avadhūta,[69] See Kathashruti

Shukla Yajurveda Jābāla, Paramahaṃsa, Advayatāraka, Bhikṣuka, Turīyātīta,
Yājñavalkya, Śātyāyani

Atharvaveda Ashrama,[70] Nārada-parivrajaka (Parivrāt), Paramahaṃsa parivrajaka,
Parabrahma

Six of the Sannyasa Upanishads – Aruni, Kundika, Kathashruti, Paramahansa, Jabala and Brahma – were composed before the 3rd-century CE, likely in the centuries before or after the start of the common era, states Sprockhoff; the Asrama Upanishad is dated to the 3rd-century, the Naradaparivrajaka and Satyayaniya Upanishads to around the 12th-century, and about ten of the remaining Sannyasa Upanishads are dated to have been composed in the 14th- to 15th-century CE well after the start of Islamic Sultanates period of South Asia in late 12th-century.[71][72]

The oldest Sannyasa Upanishads have a strong Advaita Vedanta outlook, and these pre-date Adi Shankara.[73] Most of the Sannyasa Upanishads present a Yoga and nondualism (Advaita) Vedanta philosophy.[74] This may be, states Patrick Olivelle, because major Hindu monasteries of early medieval period (1st millennium CE) belonged to the Advaita Vedanta tradition.[75] The 12th-century Shatyayaniya Upanishad is a significant exception, which presents qualified dualistic and Vaishnavism (Vishishtadvaita Vedanta) philosophy.[75][76]

See also

Brahmacharya

Grihastha

Jangam Sannyasi

Gymnosophist

Monk

Neo-sannyas

Nun

Purvashrama

Sanyasa yoga

Swami Sharnanandji

Vairāgya

Vanaprastha

Yogi

Notes

An alternative term for either is sannyasin.[4]

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In practice, women for example, entered Sannyasa in enough numbers that Chanakya's Arthashastra in 3rd century BC, mentions women ascetics (प्रव्रजिता, pravrajitā) in several chapters; see for example, R. Shamasastri (Translator) Chapter 23 page 160; also page 551
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AI Overview

Welcome to Mahayana Temple of New York

Mahayana, meaning "Great Vehicle," is a major branch of Buddhism emphasizing compassion and the path of the Bodhisattva (an enlightened being who delays nirvana to help others), aiming for universal liberation rather than just individual enlightenment, and includes diverse traditions like Zen, Tibetan, and Pure Land Buddhism, prevalent in East Asia, making it the largest form of Buddhism globally. It features "cosmic Buddhas" and bodhisattvas, extensive scriptures (sutras), and a focus on universal accessibility to awakening, contrasting with older schools that emphasized monasticism for personal

nirvana.

Core Concepts & Beliefs

Bodhisattva Ideal: The central goal is to become a Bodhisattva, delaying personal nirvana out of compassion to help all sentient beings achieve enlightenment.

Universal Salvation: Believes the "Great Vehicle" can carry all beings to awakening, not just monastics.

Buddha-Nature: A key teaching is that all beings possess innate Buddha-nature, the potential for enlightenment, symbolized by the white lotus.

Cosmic Buddhas: Recognizes many Buddhas and celestial beings (like the Dhyani-Buddhas) who help practitioners.

Key Traditions & Schools

Zen Buddhism: Focuses on meditation (zazen) and direct experience, strong in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Tibetan Buddhism (Vajrayana): Often seen as a subset of Mahayana, using tantric practices and rituals.

Pure Land Buddhism: Focuses on faith in Amitabha Buddha and rebirth in his Pure Land.

Nichiren Buddhism, Huayan, Tiantai: Other significant schools originating in East Asia.

Practices & Texts

Practices: Include extended puja (rituals/offerings), meditation, chanting, and the cultivation of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (the Four Limitless Contemplations).

Scriptures: Utilizes a vast collection of sutras, including the Heart Sutra, Lotus Sutra, and Vimalakirti Sutra, expanding on earlier Buddhist teachings.

Geographic Reach

Prevalent in: China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Tibet, and Mongolia.

Mahayana Buddhism

we also have Buddhas of the 10 directions we we have we have these notions of other Buddhas. and then the thousand Buddhas of this...

YouTube

Mahayana | Origins, Beliefs, Practices & Schools - Britannica

The universal accessibility of awakening, together with the idea that the universe has no beginning in time and is filled with an ...

Britannica

Mahayana | Lion's Roar

Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka approach teaches shunyata and dependent arising: the emptiness of all dependently appearing phenomena. It e...

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Mahayana is the largest branch of Buddhism, followed by Theravada. It is a broad group of Buddhist traditions, texts, philosophies, and practices developed in ...

Mahayana sutras

Prajnaparamita

East Asian Buddhism

Early Buddhist schools

People also ask

What is the Mahayana in Buddhism?

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What is Mahayana and Hinayana?

How is Mahayana Buddhism different from the original Buddhism?

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.

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Differences

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How does Mahayana Buddhism differ from other Buddhist traditions?

Origin

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What is the origin of Mahayana Buddhism?

Nature of Reality

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How does Mahayana Buddhism view the nature of reality?

Mahayana | Origins, Beliefs, Practices & Schools

Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mahayana>

Nov 4, 2025 — Mahayana, movement that arose within Indian Buddhism around the beginning of the Common Era and became by the 9th century the dominant influence on the ...

What people are saying

Mahayana buddhism- you take ?

Popular comment · My take is that it is true, but that's hardly surprising.

.

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Reddit

Mahayana vs. Theravada on Dependent Origination

Popular comment · They're not different. The teaching is essentially the same.

Theravada study of the Pali Canon won't be quite the same, with the same emphases, as Mahayana training, but they contain the same basic teachings. The difference is more the context. In Mahayana, the shravaka teachings that Theravada regards as Buddhist scripture are regarded as only the first step of practice. With entrance into the specifically Mahayana teachings, such as the heart sutra, there's a radical change in View. The heart sutra presents the teaching on shunyata or emptiness.

Pratityasamutpada says nothing exists on its own because all phenomena arise dependent on each other. A typical example is to look at a car. If you take off pieces, when does it cease to be a car? The fenders? The roof? The engine? The seats? What's the essence of carness? That's a kind of thought experiment that shows how we experience a charged projection rather than actual objects. It's a way to help reduce attachment to apparent solidity and to see how self is also a changeable composite. Shunyata is coming at it on a less dualistic level. It's pointing out that experience itself is ungraspable. Self and other are both empty of existence. Phenomena appear, yet have no substance. Form is empty and emptiness is also form. Vivid appearance yet ungraspable. In a way you could say it's the ultimate conclusion of pratityasamutpada's logic. So pratityasamutpada is looking at it in dualistic terms, ego's point of view. It's saying that what you think is solid actually isn't. Dualistic perception is the reference point. Mahayana schools teach the same thing, but then introduce shunyata as the view of post-realization. Shunyata is looking at it from the point of view of actually realizing emptiness. It's saying, "Look, you have to give up all reference points. That's the deal. There isn't even a self to lose. There isn't even loss. There's no samsara, no nirvana, no buddha, no enlightenment, nada. You don't get to have any bearings. No up or down, back or forward. That's dualistic mind. There's only the wisdom of seeing that." As it says in the heart sutra, "Since the bodhisattvas have no attainment, they abide by means of prajnaparamita." In Theravada, as I understand it, the word emptiness is used to refer to pratityasamutpada and Mahayana emptiness, shunyata, is not recognized at all. That can be a bit confusing. There are numerous shared terms that mean very different things in one school than they do in the other.

.

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Mahayana Buddhism emerged around the 1st century BCE in India, evolving from early Buddhist traditions deeply rooted in Hindu (Vedic) philosophy. Early Buddhism itself arose as a reformist movement within the broader Hindu spiritual context, emphasizing
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Back to Buddhism. At American Academy of Religion 2025, speaking on Maitreya in the Āgamas, Mahāyāna, and early Vajrayāna. Main points: Chinese Buddhist sources are useful for tracing out the evolution of Maitreya. There are unique texts preserved in Chinese that show us how Indian thinkers saw Maitreya. In the early Tantric tradition, Maitreya is reformulated into an aspect of awakening, rather than being the future buddha.

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#KhandroGongdu Ka-Nying Mahakala-Kali Shambhala-Dakini Mahayana Seal
Tsogyal, me, Teacher of all teachers, Teacher of Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal, Shakyamuni why am I so busy transcribing Terma for everybody oh goddd Tsogyal so hardworking bcoz all my beloved Tulkus Tertons Geshe Khenpos Khenchens Lopons so hardworking just like me Tsogyal the most strategic and meticulous Lhamo no discrepancy no loophole no backfire no blind spot no sabotage Does Bhutan need me, Tsogyal, to be back there? Of course Yes. All my beloved Sarma schools, my beloved Bhutan & Bhutan's contents and their Timeline (humans/demographic, landscape/geographic, weather etc) are Yeshe Tsogyal's prophecy hence Tsogyal's creation (Tsogyal is the Creator, all created by Tsogyal's Vajra Mind, she is currently known as Felishya Yusa Tsogyal Lhamo 叶美凤) with all their very details including happiness and troubles..all for the sake of all beings' enlightenment without exception, Heart Essence of Shakyamuni
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Mahayana Buddhism and Tradition

Original Buddhas

<https://www.originalbuddhas.com/blog/mahayana-b...>

Mahayana refers to the path of Bodhisattva to attain Enlightenment to help all sentient beings free from all suffering and pain.

Mahayana

Rigpa Wiki

<https://www.rigpawiki.org/title=Mahayana>

Sep 14, 2023 — The essence of the Mahayana is the aspiration to attain buddhahood as the only means to help all beings find liberation from suffering.

Mahayana Buddhism

BBC

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/buddhism/subdivisions/ma...>

Oct 2, 2002 — Mahayana Buddhism is not a single group but a collection of Buddhist traditions: Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism are all forms of ...

Mahayana Buddhism

Lion's Roar

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Mahayana is one of the primary branches of Buddhism and the dominant form practiced in China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia.

7.2.2: Mahayana Buddhism

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An illustration in a manuscript of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* from Nalanda, depicting the bodhisattva Maitreya, an important figure in Mahāyāna

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Nirvāṇa

Traditions

TheravādaPāliMahāyānaHinayanaChineseVajrayānaTibetanNavayanaNewar

Buddhism by country

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vte

Mahayana[a] is the largest branch of Buddhism, followed by Theravada. It is a broad group of Buddhist traditions, texts, philosophies, and practices developed in ancient India (c. 1st century BCE onwards). Mahāyāna accepts the main scriptures and teachings of early Buddhism but also recognizes various doctrines and texts that are not accepted by Theravada Buddhism as original. These include the Mahāyāna sūtras and their emphasis on the bodhisattva path and Prajñāpāramitā.[1] Vajrayana or Mantra traditions are a subset of Mahāyāna which makes use of numerous Tantric methods Vajrayānists consider to help achieve Buddhahood.[2]

Mahāyāna also refers to the path of the bodhisattva striving to become a fully awakened Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings, and is thus also called the "Bodhisattva Vehicle" (Bodhisattvayāna).[3][note 1] Mahāyāna Buddhism generally sees the goal of becoming a Buddha through the bodhisattva path as being available to all and sees the state of the arhat as incomplete.[4] Mahāyāna also includes numerous Buddhas and bodhisattvas that are not found in Theravada (such as Amitābha and Vairocana).[5] Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy also promotes unique theories, such as the Madhyamaka theory of emptiness (śūnyatā), the Vijñānavāda ("the doctrine of consciousness" also called "mind-only"), and the Buddha-nature teaching.

While initially a small movement in India, Mahāyāna eventually grew to become an influential force in Indian Buddhism.[6] Large scholastic centers associated with Mahāyāna such as Nalanda and Vikramashila thrived between the 7th and 12th centuries.[6] In the course of its history, Mahāyāna Buddhism spread from South Asia to East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Himalayan regions. Various Mahāyāna traditions are the predominant forms of Buddhism found in China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia.[7] Since Vajrayana is a tantric form of Mahāyāna, Mahāyāna Buddhism is also dominant in Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, and other Himalayan regions. It has also been traditionally present elsewhere in Asia as a minority among Buddhist communities in Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia and regions with Asian diaspora communities.

As of 2010, the Mahāyāna tradition was the largest major tradition of Buddhism, with 53% of Buddhists belonging to East Asian Mahāyāna and 6% to Vajrayana, compared to 36% to Theravada.[8]

Etymology

Original Sanskrit

The Five Tathāgatas in Shishoin Temple (Tokyo). A unique feature of Mahāyāna is the

belief that there are multiple Buddhas which are currently teaching the Dharma.

Mahāyāna Buddhist triad, including Bodhisattva Maitreya, the Buddha, and Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. 2nd–3rd century CE, Gandhāra

According to Jan Nattier, the term Mahāyāna ("Great Vehicle") was originally an honorary synonym for Bodhisattvayāna ("Bodhisattva Vehicle"),[9] the vehicle of a bodhisattva seeking buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.[3] The term Mahāyāna (which had earlier been used simply as an epithet for Buddhism itself) was therefore adopted at an early date as a synonym for the path and the teachings of the bodhisattvas. Since it was simply an honorary term for Bodhisattvayāna, the adoption of the term Mahāyāna and its application to Bodhisattvayāna did not represent a significant turning point in the development of a Mahāyāna tradition.[9]

The earliest Mahāyāna texts, such as the Lotus Sūtra, often use the term Mahāyāna as a synonym for Bodhisattvayāna, but the term Hīnayāna is comparatively rare in the earliest sources. The presumed dichotomy between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna can be deceptive, as the two terms were not actually formed in relation to one another in the same era.[10]

Among the earliest and most important references to Mahāyāna are those that occur in the Lotus Sūtra (Skt. Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra) dating between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE.[11] Seishi Karashima has suggested that the term first used in an earlier Gandhāri Prakrit version of the Lotus Sūtra was not the term mahāyāna but the Prakrit word mahājāna in the sense of mahājñāna (great knowing).[12][13] At a later stage when the early Prakrit word was converted into Sanskrit, this mahājāna, being phonetically ambivalent, may have been converted into mahāyāna, possibly because of what may have been a double meaning in the famous Parable of the Burning House, which talks of three vehicles or carts (Skt: yāna).[note 2][12][14]

Chinese translation

In Chinese, Mahāyāna is called 大乘 (dàshèng, or dàchéng), which is a calque of maha (great 大) yana (vehicle 乘). There is also the transliteration 摩訶衍那.[15][16] The term appeared in some of the earliest Mahāyāna texts, including Emperor Ling of Han's translation of the Lotus Sutra.[17] It also appears in the Chinese Āgamas, though scholars like Yin Shun argue that this is a later addition.[18][19][20] Some Chinese scholars also argue that the meaning of the term in these earlier texts is different from later ideas of Mahāyāna Buddhism.[21]

History

Seated Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva. Gandharan, from Lorian Tangai. Kushan period, 1st – 3rd century CE. Indian Museum, Calcutta

Cave complex associated with the Mahāsāṃghika sect. Karla Caves, Mahārāṣṭra, India
Origin

The origins of Mahāyāna are still not completely understood and there are numerous competing theories.[22] The earliest Western views of Mahāyāna assumed that it existed as a separate school in competition with the so-called "Hīnayāna" schools. Some of the major theories about the origins of Mahāyāna include the following:

The lay origins theory was first proposed by Jean Przyluski and then defended by Étienne Lamotte and Akira Hirakawa. This view states that laypersons were particularly important in the development of Mahāyāna and is partly based on some texts like the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, which praise lay figures at the expense of monastics.[23] This theory is no longer widely accepted since numerous early Mahāyāna works promote monasticism and asceticism.[24][25]

The Mahāsāṃghika origin theory, which argues that Mahāyāna developed within the Mahāsāṃghika tradition.[24] This is defended by scholars such as Hendrik Kern, A.K. Warder and Paul Williams who argue that at least some Mahāyāna elements developed among Mahāsāṃghika communities (from the 1st century BCE onwards), possibly in the area along the Kṛṣṇa River in the Āndhra region of southern India.[26][27][28][29] The Mahāsāṃghika doctrine of the supramundane (lokottara) nature of the Buddha is sometimes seen as a precursor to Mahāyāna views of the Buddha.[5] Some scholars also see Mahāyāna figures like Nāgārjuna, Dignaga, Candrakīrti, Āryadeva, and Bhāviveka as having ties to the Mahāsāṃghika tradition of Āndhra.[30] However, other scholars have also pointed to different regions as being important, such as Gandhara and northwest India.[31][note 3][32]

The Mahāsāṃghika origins theory has also slowly been shown to be problematic by scholarship that revealed how certain Mahāyāna sutras show traces of having developed among other nikāyas or monastic orders (such as the Dharmaguptaka).[33] Because of such evidence, scholars like Paul Harrison and Paul Williams argue that the movement was not sectarian and was possibly pan-buddhist.[24][34] There is no evidence that Mahāyāna ever referred to a separate formal school or sect of Buddhism, but rather that it existed as a certain set of ideals, and later doctrines, for aspiring bodhisattvas.[17]

The "forest hypothesis" meanwhile states that Mahāyāna arose mainly among "hard-core ascetics, members of the forest dwelling (aranyavasin) wing of the Buddhist Order", who were attempting to imitate the Buddha's forest living.[35] This has been defended by Paul Harrison, Jan Nattier and Reginald Ray. This theory is based on certain sutras like the Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra and the Mahāyāna Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā which promote ascetic practice in the wilderness as a superior and elite path. These texts criticize monks who live in cities and denigrate the forest life.[17][36]

Jan Nattier's study of the Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra, *A few good men* (2003) argues that this sutra represents the earliest form of Mahāyāna, which presents the bodhisattva path as a 'supremely difficult enterprise' of elite monastic forest asceticism.[24] Boucher's study on the Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā-sūtra (2008) is another recent work on this subject.[37]

The cult of the book theory, defended by Gregory Schopen, states that Mahāyāna arose among a number of loosely connected book worshiping groups of monastics, who studied, memorized, copied and revered particular Mahāyāna sūtras. Schopen thinks they were inspired by cult shrines where Mahāyāna sutras were kept.[24] Schopen also argued that these groups mostly rejected stupa worship, or worshiping holy relics.

David Drewes has recently argued against all of the major theories outlined above. He points out that there is no actual evidence for the existence of book shrines, that the practice of sutra veneration was pan-Buddhist and not distinctly Mahāyāna. Furthermore, Drewes argues that "Mahāyāna sutras advocate mnemonic/oral/aural practices more frequently than they do written ones." [24] Regarding the forest hypothesis, he points out that only a few Mahāyāna sutras directly advocate forest dwelling, while the others either do not mention it or see it as unhelpful, promoting easier practices such as "merely listening to the sutra, or thinking of particular Buddhas, that they claim can enable one to be reborn in special, luxurious 'pure lands' where one will be able to make easy and rapid progress on the bodhisattva path and attain Buddhahood after as little as one lifetime." [24]

Drewes states that the evidence merely shows that "Mahāyāna was primarily a textual movement, focused on the revelation, preaching, and dissemination of Mahāyāna sutras, that developed within, and never really departed from, traditional Buddhist social and institutional structures." [38] Drewes points out the importance of dharmabhāṇakas (preachers, reciters of these sutras) in the early Mahāyāna sutras. This figure is widely praised as someone who should be respected, obeyed ('as a slave serves his lord'), and donated to, and it is thus possible these people were the primary agents of the Mahāyāna movement. [38]

Early Mahayana came directly from "early Buddhist schools" and was a successor to them. [39][40]

Early Mahāyāna
Earliest Mahayana inscription

Inscribed pedestal with the first known occurrence of the name of "Amitabha Buddha" in the "year 26 of Huvishka" (153 CE) [41] In Brahmi script in the inscription:

"Bu-ddha-sya A-mi-tā-bha-sya"
"Of the Buddha Amitabha" [42]

The earliest textual evidence of "Mahāyāna" comes from sūtras ("discourses", scriptures) originating around the beginning of the common era. Jan Nattier has noted that some of the earliest Mahāyāna texts, such as the Ugraparipṛccha Sūtra use the term "Mahāyāna", yet there is no doctrinal difference between Mahāyāna in this context and the early schools. Instead, Nattier writes that in the earliest sources, "Mahāyāna"

referred to the rigorous emulation of Gautama Buddha's path to Buddhahood.[17]

Some important evidence for early Mahāyāna Buddhism comes from the texts translated by the Indoscythian monk Lokakṣema in the 2nd century CE, who came to China from the kingdom of Gandhāra. These are some of the earliest known Mahāyāna texts.[43][44][note 4] Study of these texts by Paul Harrison and others show that they strongly promote monasticism (contra the lay origin theory), acknowledge the legitimacy of arhatship, and do not show any attempt to establish a new sect or order.[24] A few of these texts often emphasize ascetic practices, forest dwelling, and deep states of meditative concentration (samadhi).[45]

Indian Mahāyāna never had nor ever attempted to have a separate Vinaya or ordination lineage from the early schools of Buddhism, and therefore each bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī adhering to the Mahāyāna formally belonged to one of the early Buddhist schools. Membership in these nikāyas, or monastic orders, continues today, with the Dharmaguptaka nikāya being used in East Asia, and the Mūlasarvāstivāda nikāya being used in Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, Mahāyāna was never a separate monastic sect outside of the early schools.[46]

Painting from the Mogao Caves (Cave 217), Dunhuang, illustrating Sukhavati, the buddhafiield of Amitabha Buddha

Photograph of three bodhisattva statues found at Jamal Garhi (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan).

Paul Harrison clarifies that while monastic Mahāyānists belonged to a nikāya, not all members of a nikāya were Mahāyānists.[47] From Chinese monks visiting India, we now know that both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna monks in India often lived in the same monasteries side by side.[48] It is also possible that, formally, Mahāyāna would have been understood as a group of monks or nuns within a larger monastery taking a vow together (known as a "kriyākarma") to memorize and study a Mahāyāna text or texts.[49]

The earliest stone inscription containing a recognizably Mahāyāna formulation and a mention of the Buddha Amitābha (an important Mahāyāna figure) was found in the Indian subcontinent in Mathura, and dated to around 180 CE. Remains of a statue of a Buddha bear the Brāhmī inscription: "Made in the year 28 of the reign of King Huviṣka, ... for the Blessed One, the Buddha Amitābha." [42] There is also some evidence that the Kushan Emperor Huviṣka himself was a follower of Mahāyāna. A Sanskrit manuscript fragment in the Schøyen Collection describes Huviṣka as having "set forth in the Mahāyāna." [50] Evidence of the name "Mahāyāna" in Indian inscriptions in the period before the 5th century is very limited in comparison to the multiplicity of Mahāyāna writings transmitted from Central Asia to China at that time.[note 5][note 6] [note 7]

Based on archeological evidence, Gregory Schopen argues that Indian Mahāyāna

remained "an extremely limited minority movement – if it remained at all – that attracted absolutely no documented public or popular support for at least two more centuries." [24] Likewise, Joseph Walser speaks of Mahāyāna's "virtual invisibility in the archaeological record until the fifth century". [51] Schopen also sees this movement as being in tension with other Buddhists, "struggling for recognition and acceptance". [52] Their "embattled mentality" may have led to certain elements found in Mahāyāna texts like Lotus sutra, such as a concern with preserving texts. [52]

Schopen, Harrison and Nattier also argue that these communities were probably not a single unified movement, but scattered groups based on different practices and sutras. [24] One reason for this view is that Mahāyāna sources are extremely diverse, advocating many different, often conflicting doctrines and positions, as Jan Nattier writes: [53]

Thus we find one scripture (the Aksobhya-vyuha) that advocates both śrāvaka and bodhisattva practices, propounds the possibility of rebirth in a pure land, and enthusiastically recommends the cult of the book, yet seems to know nothing of emptiness theory, the ten bhūmis, or the trikaya, while another (the P'u-sa pen-yeh ching) propounds the ten bhūmis and focuses exclusively on the path of the bodhisattva, but never discusses the paramitas. A Madhyamika treatise (Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamika-karikas) may enthusiastically deploy the rhetoric of emptiness without ever mentioning the bodhisattva path, while a Yogacara treatise (Vasubandhu's Madhyanta-vibhaga-bhasya) may delve into the particulars of the trikaya doctrine while eschewing the doctrine of ekayana. We must be prepared, in other words, to encounter a multiplicity of Mahayanas flourishing even in India, not to mention those that developed in East Asia and Tibet.

In spite of being a minority in India, Indian Mahāyāna was an intellectually vibrant movement, which developed various schools of thought during what Jan Westerhoff has been called "The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy" (from the beginning of the first millennium CE up to the 7th century). [54] Some major Mahāyāna traditions are Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamaka, Yogācāra, Buddha-nature (Tathāgatagarbha), and the school of Dignaga and Dharmakīrti as the last and most recent. [55] Major early figures include Nagarjuna, Āryadeva, Aśvaghoṣa, Asanga, Vasubandhu, and Dignaga. Mahāyāna Buddhists seem to have been active in the Kushan Empire (30–375 CE), a period that saw great missionary and literary activities by Buddhists. This is supported by the works of the historian Taranatha. [56]

Growth

Ruins of the Nalanda Mahavihara (Great Monastery) in Bihar, a major center for the study of Mahāyāna Buddhism from the fifth century CE to c. 1200 CE

Buddhist expansion in Asia, from Buddhist heartland in northern India (dark orange) starting 5th century BCE, to Buddhist majority realm (orange) with the exception of

China, and historical extent of Buddhism influences (yellow). Mahāyāna (red arrow), Theravāda (green arrow), and Tantric-Vajrayāna (blue arrow). The overland and maritime "Silk Roads" were interlinked and complementary, forming what scholars have called the "great circle of Buddhism".[40]

The Mahāyāna movement (or movements) remained quite small until it experienced much growth in the fifth century. Very few manuscripts have been found before the fifth century (the exceptions are from Bamiyan). According to Walser, "the fifth and sixth centuries appear to have been a watershed for the production of Mahāyāna manuscripts." [57] Likewise it is only in the 4th and 5th centuries CE that epigraphic evidence shows some kind of popular support for Mahāyāna, including some possible royal support at the kingdom of Shan shan as well as in Bamiyan and Mathura.[58]

Still, even after the 5th century, the epigraphic evidence which uses the term Mahāyāna is still quite small and is notably mainly monastic, not lay.[58] By this time, Chinese pilgrims, such as Faxian (337–422 CE), Xuanzang (602–664), Yijing (635–713 CE) were traveling to India, and their writings do describe monasteries which they label 'Mahāyāna' as well as monasteries where both Mahāyāna monks and non-Mahāyāna monks lived together.[59]

After the fifth century, Mahāyāna Buddhism and its institutions slowly grew in influence. Some of the most influential institutions became massive monastic university complexes such as Nalanda (established by the 5th-century CE Gupta emperor, Kumaragupta I) and Vikramashila (established under Dharmapala c. 783 to 820) which were centers of various branches of scholarship, including Mahāyāna philosophy. The Nalanda complex eventually became the largest and most influential Buddhist center in India for centuries. [60] Even so, as noted by Paul Williams, "it seems that fewer than 50 percent of the monks encountered by Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang; c. 600–664) on his visit to India actually were Mahāyānists." [61]

Expansion outside of India

Recreation of a cave mural from the Mogao Caves depicting the Buddha surrounded by bodhisattvas

Over time Indian Mahāyāna texts and philosophy reached Central Asia and China through trade routes like the Silk Road, later spreading throughout East Asia.[39] Over time, Central Asian Buddhism became heavily influenced by Mahāyāna and it was a major source for Chinese Buddhism. Mahāyāna works have also been found in Gandhāra, indicating the importance of this region for the spread of Mahāyāna. Central Asian Mahāyāna scholars were very important in the Silk Road Transmission of Buddhism.[62] They include translators like Lokakṣema (c. 167–186), Dharmarakṣa (c. 265–313), Kumārajīva (c. 401), and Dharmakṣema (385–433). The site of Dunhuang seems to have been a particularly important place for the study of Mahāyāna Buddhism. [56]

Mahāyāna spread from China to Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan, which (along with Korea)

would later spread it to Japan.[39][40] Mahāyāna also spread from India to Myanmar, and then Sumatra and Malaysia.[39][40] Mahāyāna spread from Sumatra to other Indonesian islands, including Java and Borneo, the Philippines, Cambodia, and eventually, Indonesian Mahāyāna traditions made it to China.[39][40]

By the fourth century, Chinese monks like Faxian (c. 337–422 CE) had also begun to travel to India (now dominated by the Guptas) to bring back Buddhist teachings, especially Mahāyāna works.[63] These figures also wrote about their experiences in India and their work remains invaluable for understanding Indian Buddhism. In some cases Indian Mahāyāna traditions were directly transplanted, as with the case of the East Asian Madhyamaka (by Kumārajīva) and East Asian Yogacara (especially by Xuanzang). Later, new developments in Chinese Mahāyāna led to new Chinese Buddhist traditions like Tiantai, Huayen, Pure Land and Chan Buddhism (Zen). These traditions would then spread to Korea, Vietnam and Japan.

Forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism which are mainly based on the doctrines of Indian Mahāyāna sūtras are still popular in East Asian Buddhism, which is mostly dominated by various branches of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Paul Williams has noted that in this tradition in the Far East, primacy has always been given to the study of the Mahāyāna sūtras.[64]

Later developments

The use of mandalas was one new feature of Tantric Buddhism, which also adopted new deities such as Chakrasamvara (pictured)

Beginning during the Gupta (c. 3rd century CE–575 CE) period a new movement began to develop which drew on previous Mahāyāna doctrine as well as new Pan-Indian tantric ideas. This came to be known by various names such as Vajrayāna (Tibetan: rdo rje theg pa), Mantrayāna, and Esoteric Buddhism or "Secret Mantra" (Guhyamantra). This new movement continued into the Pala era (8th century–12th century CE), during which it grew to dominate Indian Buddhism.[65] Possibly led by groups of wandering tantric yogis named mahasiddhas, this movement developed new tantric spiritual practices and also promoted new texts called the Buddhist Tantras.[66]

Philosophically, Vajrayāna Buddhist thought remained grounded in the Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas of Madhyamaka, Yogacara and Buddha-nature.[67][68] Tantric Buddhism generally deals with new forms of meditation and ritual which often makes use of the visualization of Buddhist deities (including Buddhas, bodhisattvas, dakinis, and fierce deities) and the use of mantras. Most of these practices are esoteric and require ritual initiation or introduction by a tantric master (vajracarya) or guru.[69]

The source and early origins of Vajrayāna remain a subject of debate among scholars. Some scholars like Alexis Sanderson argue that Vajrayāna derives its tantric content from Shaivism and that it developed as a result of royal courts sponsoring both Buddhism and Saivism. Sanderson argues that Vajrayāna works like the Samvara and

Guhyasamaja texts show direct borrowing from Shaiva tantric literature.[70][71] However, other scholars such as Ronald M. Davidson question the idea that Indian tantrism developed in Shaivism first and that it was then adopted into Buddhism. Davidson points to the difficulties of establishing a chronology for the Shaiva tantric literature and argues that both traditions developed side by side, drawing on each other as well as on local Indian tribal religion.[72]

Whatever the case, this new tantric form of Mahāyāna Buddhism became extremely influential in India, especially in Kashmir and in the lands of the Pala Empire. It eventually also spread north into Central Asia, the Tibetan plateau and to East Asia. Vajrayāna remains the dominant form of Buddhism in Tibet, in surrounding regions like Bhutan and in Mongolia. Esoteric elements are also an important part of East Asian Buddhism where it is referred to by various terms. These include: Zhēnyán (Chinese: 真言, literally "true word", referring to mantra), Mijiao (Chinese: 密教; Esoteric Teaching), Mizōng (密宗; "Esoteric Tradition") or Tángmì (唐密; "Tang (Dynasty) Esoterica") in Chinese and Shingon, Tomitsu, Mikkyo, and Taimitsu in Japanese.

Worldview

A Ming bronze of the Buddha Mahāvairocana which depicts his body as being composed of numerous other Buddhas

The female bodhisattva Prajñaparamita Devi

Few things can be said with certainty about Mahāyāna Buddhism in general other than that the Buddhism practiced in China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Korea, Tibet, Mongolia and Japan is Mahāyāna Buddhism.[note 8] Mahāyāna can be described as a loosely bound collection of many teachings and practices (some of which are seemingly contradictory). [note 9] Mahāyāna constitutes an inclusive and broad set of traditions characterized by plurality and the adoption of a vast number of new sutras, ideas and philosophical treatises in addition to the earlier Buddhist texts.

Broadly speaking, Mahāyāna Buddhists accept the classic Buddhist doctrines found in early Buddhism (i.e. the Nikāya and Āgamas), such as the Middle Way, Dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Three Jewels, the Three marks of existence and the bodhipakṣadharma (aids to awakening).[73] Mahāyāna Buddhism further accepts some of the ideas found in Buddhist Abhidharma thought. However, Mahāyāna also adds numerous Mahāyāna texts and doctrines, which are seen as definitive and in some cases superior teachings.[74][75] D.T. Suzuki described the broad range and doctrinal liberality of Mahāyāna as "a vast ocean where all kinds of living beings are allowed to thrive in a most generous manner, almost verging on a chaos".[76]

Paul Williams refers to the main impulse behind Mahāyāna as the vision which sees the motivation to achieve Buddhahood for sake of other beings as being the supreme religious motivation. This is the way that Atisha defines Mahāyāna in his

Bodhipathapradipa.[77] As such, according to Williams, "Mahāyāna is not as such an institutional identity. Rather, it is inner motivation and vision, and this inner vision can be found in anyone regardless of their institutional position." [78] Thus, instead of a specific school or sect, Mahāyāna is a "family term" or a religious tendency, which is united by "a vision of the ultimate goal of attaining full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings (the 'bodhisattva ideal') and also (or eventually) a belief that Buddhas are still around and can be contacted (hence the possibility of an ongoing revelation)." [79]

The Buddhas

Tibetan depiction of Buddha Amitāyus in his Pure Land of Sukhavati

The monumental sculpture of the Longmen Buddha Grottoes contains a giant statue of Vairocana Buddha

Buddhas and bodhisattvas (beings on their way to Buddhahood) are central elements of Mahāyāna. Mahāyāna has a vastly expanded cosmology and theology, with various Buddhas and powerful bodhisattvas residing in different worlds and buddha-fields (buddha kshetra). [5] Buddhas unique to Mahāyāna include the Buddhas Amitābha ("Infinite Light"), Akṣobhya ("the Imperturbable"), Bhaiṣajyaguru ("Medicine guru") and Vairocana ("the Illuminator"). In Mahāyāna, a Buddha is seen as a being that has achieved the highest kind of awakening due to his superior compassion and wish to help all beings. [80]

An important feature of Mahāyāna is the way that it understands the nature of a Buddha, which differs from non-Mahāyāna understandings. Mahāyāna texts not only often depict numerous Buddhas besides Sakyamuni, but see them as transcendental or supramundane (lokuttara) beings with great powers and huge lifetimes. The White Lotus Sutra famously describes the lifespan of the Buddha as immeasurable and states that he actually achieved Buddhahood countless of eons (kalpas) ago and has been teaching the Dharma through his numerous avatars for an unimaginable period of time. [81][82][83]

Furthermore, Buddhas are active in the world, constantly devising ways to teach and help all sentient beings. According to Paul Williams, in Mahāyāna, a Buddha is often seen as "a spiritual king, relating to and caring for the world", rather than simply a teacher who after his death "has completely 'gone beyond' the world and its cares". [84] Buddha Sakyamuni's life and death on earth are then usually understood docetically as a "mere appearance", his death is a show, while in actuality he remains out of compassion to help all sentient beings. [84] Similarly, Guang Xing describes the Buddha in Mahāyāna as an omnipotent and almighty divinity "endowed with numerous supernatural attributes and qualities". [85] Mahayana Buddhologies have often been compared to various types of theism (including pantheism) by different scholars, though there is disagreement among scholars regarding this issue as well on the general relationship between Buddhism and Theism. [86]

The idea that Buddhas remain accessible is extremely influential in Mahāyāna and also allows for the possibility of having a reciprocal relationship with a Buddha through prayer, visions, devotion and revelations.[87] Through the use of various practices, a Mahāyāna devotee can aspire to be reborn in a Buddha's pure land or buddha field (buddhakṣetra), where they can strive towards Buddhahood in the best possible conditions. Depending on the sect, liberation into a buddha-field can be obtained by faith, meditation, or sometimes even by the repetition of Buddha's name. Faith-based devotional practices focused on rebirth in pure lands are common in East Asia Pure Land Buddhism.[88]

The influential Mahāyāna concept of the three bodies (trikāya) of a Buddha developed to make sense of the transcendental nature of the Buddha. This doctrine holds that the "bodies of magical transformation" (nirmāṇakāyas) and the "enjoyment bodies" (saṃbhogakāya) are emanations from the ultimate Buddha body, the Dharmakaya, which is none other than the ultimate reality itself, i.e. emptiness or Thusness.[89]

The Bodhisattvas

Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Ajaṇṭā Caves, Maharashtra, India
The Mahāyāna bodhisattva path (mārga) or vehicle (yāna) is seen as being the superior spiritual path by Mahāyānists, over and above the paths of those who seek arhatship or "solitary buddhahood" for their own sake (Śrāvakayāna and Pratyekabuddhayāna).[90] Mahāyāna Buddhists generally hold that pursuing only the personal release from suffering i.e. nirvāṇa is a smaller or inferior aspiration (called "hinayana"), because it lacks the wish and resolve to liberate all other sentient beings from saṃsāra (the round of rebirth) by becoming a Buddha.[91][92][93]

This wish to help others by entering the Mahāyāna path is called bodhicitta and someone who engages in this path to complete buddhahood is a bodhisattva. High level bodhisattvas (with eons of practice) are seen as extremely powerful supramundane beings. They are objects of devotion and prayer throughout the Mahāyāna world.[94] Popular bodhisattvas which are revered across Mahāyāna include Avalokiteshvara, Mañjuśrī, Tara and Maitreya. Bodhisattvas could reach the personal nirvana of the arhats, but they reject this goal and remain in saṃsāra to help others out of compassion.[95][96][94]

According to eighth-century Mahāyāna philosopher Haribhadra, the term "bodhisattva" can technically refer to those who follow any of the three vehicles, since all are working towards bodhi (awakening) and hence the technical term for a Mahāyāna bodhisattva is a mahāsattva (great being) bodhisattva.[97] According to Paul Williams, a Mahāyāna bodhisattva is best defined as:

that being who has taken the vow to be reborn, no matter how many times this may be necessary, in order to attain the highest possible goal, that of Complete and Perfect Buddhahood. This is for the benefit of all sentient beings.[97]

There are two models for the nature of the bodhisattvas, which are seen in the various Mahāyāna texts. One is the idea that a bodhisattva must postpone their awakening until full Buddhahood is attained. This could take eons and in the meantime, they will help countless beings. After reaching Buddhahood, they do pass on to nirvāṇa (after which they do not return). The second model is the idea that there are two kinds of nirvāṇa, the nirvāṇa of an arhat and a superior type of nirvāṇa called apratiṣṭhita (non-abiding, not-established) that allows a Buddha to remain forever engaged in the world. As noted by Paul Williams, the idea of apratiṣṭhita nirvāṇa may have taken some time to develop and is not obvious in some of the early Mahāyāna literature.[96]

Illustrated Korean manuscript of the Lotus Sutra, Goryeo Dynasty, c. 1340. The three carts at the top which are symbolic of the three vehicles

Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara) with multiple arms symbolizing upaya and great compassion, Leshan, China

The Lotus, especially the puṇḍarīka (white lotus), is used in Mahāyāna to symbolize the nature of bodhisattvas. The lotus is rooted in the earthly mud and yet flowers above the water in the open air. Similarly, the bodhisattva lives in the world but remains unstained by it[98]

The Bodhisattva Path

In most classic Mahāyāna sources (as well as in non-Mahāyāna sources on the topic), the bodhisattva path is said to take three or four asaṃkheyyas ("incalculable eons"), requiring a huge number of lifetimes of practice to complete.[99][100] However, certain practices are sometimes held to provide shortcuts to Buddhahood (these vary widely by tradition). According to the Bodhipathapradīpa (A Lamp for the Path to Awakening) by the Indian master Atiśa, the central defining feature of a bodhisattva's path is the universal aspiration to end suffering for themselves and all other beings, i.e. bodhicitta. [101]

The bodhisattva's spiritual path is traditionally held to begin with the revolutionary event called the "arising of the Awakening Mind" (bodhicittotpāda), which is the wish to become a Buddha in order to help all beings.[100] This is achieved in different ways, such as the meditation taught by the Indian master Shantideva in his Bodhicaryavatara called "equalising self and others and exchanging self and others". Other Indian masters like Atisha and Kamalashila also teach a meditation in which we contemplate how all beings have been our close relatives or friends in past lives. This contemplation leads to the arising of deep love (maitrī) and compassion (karuṇā) for others, and thus bodhicitta is generated.[102] According to the Indian philosopher Shantideva, when great compassion and bodhicitta arises in a person's heart, they cease to be an ordinary person and become a "son or daughter of the Buddhas".[101]

The idea of the bodhisattva is not unique to Mahāyāna Buddhism and it is found in

Theravada and other early Buddhist schools. However, these schools held that becoming a bodhisattva required a prediction of one's future Buddhahood in the presence of a living Buddha.[103] In Mahāyāna, the term bodhisattva is applicable to any person from the moment they intend to become a Buddha (i.e. the moment in which bodhicitta arises in their mind) and without the requirement of a living Buddha being present.[103] Some Mahāyāna sūtras like the Lotus Sutra promote the bodhisattva path as being universal and open to everyone. Other texts disagree with this and state that only some beings have the capacity for Buddhahood.[104]

The generation of bodhicitta may then be followed by the taking of the bodhisattva vows (praṇidhāna) to "lead to Nirvana the whole immeasurable world of beings" as the Prajñaparamita sutras state. This compassionate commitment to help others is the central characteristic of the Mahāyāna bodhisattva.[105] These vows may be accompanied by certain ethical guidelines called bodhisattva precepts. Numerous sutras also state that a key part of the bodhisattva path is the practice of a set of virtues called pāramitās (transcendent or supreme virtues). Sometimes six are outlined: giving, ethical discipline, patient endurance, diligence, meditation and transcendent wisdom. [106][5]

Other sutras (like the Daśabhūmika) give a list of ten, with the addition of upāya (skillful means), praṇidhāna (vow, resolution), Bala (spiritual power) and Jñāna (knowledge). [107] Prajñā (transcendent knowledge or wisdom) is arguably the most important virtue of the bodhisattva. This refers to an understanding of the emptiness of all phenomena, arising from study, deep consideration and meditation.[105]

Bodhisattva levels

Amitābha Descending with Twenty-five Bodhisattvas (13th century), National Treasure, Chion-in, Kyoto, is regarded as a representative work of early Pure Land Buddhist art in Japan. In Japanese Buddhism, one of the Ten realms in which sentient beings aspire to be reborn is the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss of Amitābha.

Various Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures associate the beginning of the bodhisattva practice with what is called the "path of accumulation" or equipment (saṃbhāra-mārga), which is the first path of the classic five paths schema.[108]

The Daśabhūmika Sūtra as well as other texts also outline a series of bodhisattva levels or spiritual stages (bhūmis) on the path to Buddhahood. The various texts disagree on the number of stages however, the Daśabhūmika giving ten for example (and mapping each one to the ten paramitas), the Bodhisattvabhūmi giving seven and thirteen and the Avatamsaka outlining 40 stages.[107]

In later Mahāyāna scholasticism, such as in the work of Kamalashila and Atiśa, the five paths and ten bhūmi systems are merged and this is the progressive path model that is used in Tibetan Buddhism. According to Paul Williams, in these systems, the first bhūmi is reached once one attains "direct, nonconceptual and nondual insight into emptiness

in meditative absorption", which is associated with the path of seeing (darśana-mārga). [108] At this point, a bodhisattva is considered an ārya (a noble being). [109]

Skillful means and the One Vehicle

Main article: upāya

Skillful means or Expedient techniques (Skt. upāya) is another important virtue and doctrine in Mahāyāna Buddhism. [110] The idea is most famously expounded in the White Lotus Sutra, and refers to any effective method or technique that is conducive to spiritual growth and leads beings to awakening and nirvana. This doctrine states that, out of compassion, the Buddha adapts his teaching to whomever he is teaching. Because of this, it is possible that the Buddha may teach seemingly contradictory things to different people. This idea is also used to explain the vast textual corpus found in Mahāyāna. [111]

A closely related teaching is the doctrine of the One Vehicle (ekayāna). This teaching states that even though the Buddha is said to have taught three vehicles (the disciples' vehicle, the vehicle of solitary Buddhas and the bodhisattva vehicle, which are accepted by all early Buddhist schools), these actually are all skillful means which lead to the same place: Buddhahood. Therefore, there really are not three vehicles in an ultimate sense, but one vehicle, the supreme vehicle of the Buddhas, which is taught in different ways depending on the faculties of individuals. Even those beings who think they have finished the path (i.e. the arhats) are actually not done, and they will eventually reach Buddhahood. [111]

This doctrine was not accepted in full by all Mahāyāna traditions. The Yogācāra school famously defended an alternative theory that held that not all beings could become Buddhas. This became a subject of much debate throughout Mahāyāna Buddhist history. [112]

Prajñāpāramitā (Transcendent Knowledge)

Prajñāpāramitā is often personified by a female deity in Buddhist art. Some of the key Mahāyāna teachings are found in the Prajñāpāramitā ("Transcendent Knowledge" or "Perfection of Wisdom") texts, which are some of the earliest Mahāyāna works. [113] Prajñāpāramitā is a deep knowledge of reality which Buddhas and bodhisattvas attain. It is a transcendent, non-conceptual and non-dual kind of knowledge into the true nature of things. [114] This wisdom is also associated with insight into the emptiness (śūnyatā) of dharmas (phenomena) and their illusory nature (māyā). [115] This amounts to the idea that all phenomena (dharmas) without exception have "no essential unchanging core" (i.e. they lack svabhāva, an essence or inherent nature), and therefore have "no fundamentally real existence". [116] These empty phenomena are also said to be conceptual constructions. [117]

Because of this, all dharmas (things, phenomena), even the Buddha's Teaching, the Buddha himself, Nirvāṇa and all living beings, are like "illusions" or "magic" (māyā) and

"dreams" (svapna).[118][117] This emptiness or lack of real existence applies even to the apparent arising and ceasing of phenomena. Because of this, all phenomena are also described as unarisen (anutpāda), unborn (ajata), "beyond coming and going" in the Prajñāpāramitā literature.[119][120] Most famously, the Heart Sutra states that "all phenomena are empty, that is, without characteristic, unproduced, unceased, stainless, not stainless, undiminished, unfilled".[121] The Prajñāpāramitā texts also use various metaphors to describe the nature of things, for example, the Diamond Sutra compares phenomena to: "A shooting star, a clouding of the sight, a lamp, an illusion, a drop of dew, a bubble, a dream, a lightning's flash, a thunder cloud."[citation needed]

Prajñāpāramitā is also associated with not grasping, not taking a stand on or "not taking up" (aparigṛhīta) anything in the world. The Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra explains it as "not grasping at form, not grasping at sensation, perception, volitions and cognition".[122] This includes not grasping or taking up even correct Buddhist ideas or mental signs (such as "not-self", "emptiness", bodhicitta, vows), since these things are ultimately all empty concepts as well.[123][117]

Attaining a state of fearless receptivity (ksanti) through the insight into the true nature of reality (Dharmatā) in an intuitive, non-conceptual manner is said to be the prajñāpāramitā, the highest spiritual wisdom. According to Edward Conze, the "patient acceptance of the non-arising of dharmas" (anutpattika-dharmakshanti) is "one of the most distinctive virtues of the Mahāyānistic saint." [124] The Prajñāpāramitā texts also claim that this training is not just for Mahāyānists, but for all Buddhists following any of the three vehicles.[125]

Madhyamaka (Centrism)

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A statue of the Mahāyāna philosopher Nagarjuna, founder of the Madhyamaka school. Considered by some to be an Arya (noble) bodhisattva or even the "second Buddha"[126]

The Mahāyāna philosophical school termed Madhyamaka (Middle theory or Centrism, also known as śūnyavāda, 'the emptiness theory') was founded by the second-century figure of Nagarjuna. This philosophical tradition focuses on refuting all theories which

posit any kind of substance, inherent existence or intrinsic nature (svabhāva).[127]

In his writings, Nagarjuna attempts to show that any theory of intrinsic nature is contradicted by the Buddha's theory of dependent origination, since anything that has an independent existence cannot be dependently originated. The śūnyavāda philosophers were adamant that their denial of svabhāva is not a kind of nihilism (against protestations to the contrary by their opponents).[128]

Using the two truths theory, Madhyamaka claims that while one can speak of things existing in a conventional, relative sense, they do not exist inherently in an ultimate sense. Madhyamaka also argues that emptiness itself is also "empty", it does not have an absolute inherent existence of its own. It is also not to be understood as a transcendental absolute reality. Instead, the emptiness theory is merely a useful concept that should not be clung to. In fact, for Madhyamaka, since everything is empty of true existence, all things are just conceptualizations (prajñapti-matra), including the theory of emptiness, and all concepts must ultimately be abandoned in order to truly understand the nature of things.[128]

Vijñānavāda (The Consciousness doctrine)

Vijñānavāda ("the doctrine of consciousness", a.k.a. vijñapti-mātra, "perceptions only" and citta-mātra "mind only") is another important doctrine promoted by some Mahāyāna sutras which later became the central theory of a major philosophical movement which arose during the Gupta period called Yogācāra. The primary sutra associated with this school of thought is the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra, which claims that śūnyavāda is not the final definitive teaching (nītārtha) of the Buddha. Instead, the ultimate truth (paramārtha-satya) is said to be the view that all things (dharmas) are only mind (citta), consciousness (vijñāna) or perceptions (vijñapti) and that seemingly "external" objects (or "internal" subjects) do not really exist apart from the dependently originated flow of mental experiences.[129]

When this flow of mentality is seen as being empty of the subject-object duality we impose upon it, one reaches the non-dual cognition of "Thusness" (tathatā), which is nirvana. This doctrine is developed through various theories, the most important being the eight consciousnesses and the three natures.[130] The Saṃdhinirmocana calls its doctrine the 'third turning of the dharma wheel'. The Pratyutpanna sutra also mentions this doctrine, stating: "whatever belongs to this triple world is nothing but thought [citta-mātra]. Why is that? It is because however I imagine things, that is how they appear". [130]

The most influential thinkers in this tradition were the Indian brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu. Yogācāra philosophers developed their own interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness which also criticized Madhyamaka, in effect claiming it fell into nihilism. [131]

Buddha-nature

A Kamakura period reliquary topped with a cintamani (wish fulfilling jewel). Buddha nature texts often use the metaphor of a jewel (i.e. buddha-nature) which all beings have but are unaware of

Main article: Buddha-nature

The doctrine of Tathāgata embryo or Tathāgata womb (Tathāgatagarbha), also known as Buddha-nature, matrix or principle (Skt: Buddha-dhātu) is important in all modern Mahāyāna traditions, though it is interpreted in many different ways. Broadly speaking, Buddha-nature is concerned with explaining what allows sentient beings to become Buddhas.[132] The earliest sources for this idea may include the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra and the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra.[133][132] The Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa refers to "a sacred nature that is the basis for [beings] becoming buddhas", [134] and it also describes it as the 'Self' (atman).[135]

David Seyfort Ruegg explains this concept as the base or support for the practice of the path, and thus it is the "cause" (hetu) for the fruit of Buddhahood.[132] The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra states that within the defilements is found "the tathagata's wisdom, the tathagata's vision, and the tathagata's body...eternally unsullied, and...replete with virtues no different from my own...the tathagatagarbhas of all beings are eternal and unchanging".[136]

The ideas found in the Buddha-nature literature are a source of much debate and disagreement among Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers as well as modern academics. [137] Some scholars have seen this as an influence from Brahmanic Hinduism, and some of these sutras admit that the use of the term 'Self' is partly done in order to win over non-Buddhist ascetics (in other words, it is a skillful means).[138][139] According to some scholars, the Buddha-nature discussed in some Mahāyāna sūtras does not represent a substantial self (ātman) which the Buddha critiqued; rather, it is a positive expression of emptiness (śūnyatā) and represents the potentiality to realize Buddhahood through Buddhist practices.[140] Similarly, Williams thinks that this doctrine was not originally dealing with ontological issues, but with "religious issues of realising one's spiritual potential, exhortation, and encouragement." [136]

The Buddha-nature genre of sūtras can be seen as an attempt to state Buddhist teachings using positive language while also maintaining the middle way, to prevent people from being turned away from Buddhism by a false impression of nihilism.[141] This is the position taken by the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, which states that the Buddhas teach the doctrine of tathāgatagarbha (which sounds similar to an atman) in order to help those beings who are attached to the idea of anatman. However, the sutra goes on to say that the tathāgatagarbha is empty and is not actually a substantial self.[142][143]

A different view is defended by various modern scholars like Michael Zimmermann. This view is the idea that Buddha-nature sutras such as the Mahāparinirvāṇa and the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra teach an affirmative vision of an eternal, indestructible Buddhist Self.[135] Shenpen Hookham, a western scholar and lama sees Buddha-nature as a

True Self that is real and permanent.[144] Similarly, C. D. Sebastian understands the Ratnagotravibhāga's view of this topic as a transcendental self that is "the unique essence of the universe".[145]

Arguments for authenticity

Indian Mahāyāna Buddhists faced various criticisms from non-Mahāyānists regarding the authenticity of their teachings. The main critique they faced was that Mahāyāna teachings had not been taught by the Buddha, but were invented by later figures.[146] [147] Numerous Mahāyāna texts discuss this issue and attempt to defend the truth and authenticity of Mahāyāna in various ways.[148]

One idea that Mahāyāna texts put forth is that Mahāyāna teachings were taught later because most people were unable to understand the Mahāyāna sūtras at the time of the Buddha and that people were ready to hear the Mahāyāna only in later times.[149] Certain traditional accounts state that Mahāyāna sutras were hidden away or kept safe by divine beings like Nagas or bodhisattvas until the time came for their dissemination. [150][151]

Similarly, some sources also state that Mahāyāna teachings were revealed by other Buddhas, bodhisattvas and devas to a select number of individuals (often through visions or dreams).[148] Some scholars have seen a connection between this idea and Mahāyāna meditation practices which involve the visualization of Buddhas and their Buddha-lands.[152]

Another argument that Indian Buddhists used in favor of the Mahāyāna is that its teachings are true and lead to awakening since they are in line with the Dharma. Because of this, they can be said to be "well said" (subhasita), and therefore, they can be said to be the word of the Buddha in this sense. This idea that whatever is "well spoken" is the Buddha's word can be traced to the earliest Buddhist texts, but it is interpreted more widely in Mahāyāna.[153] From the Mahāyāna point of view, a teaching is the "word of the Buddha" because it is in accord with the Dharma, not because it was spoken by a specific individual (i.e. Gautama).[154] This idea can be seen in the writings of Shantideva (8th century), who argues that an "inspired utterance" is the Buddha word if it is "connected with the truth", "connected with the Dharma", "brings about renunciation of kleshas, not their increase" and "it shows the laudable qualities of nirvana, not those of samsara".[155]

The modern Japanese Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki similarly argued that while the Mahāyāna sūtras may not have been directly taught by the historical Buddha, the "spirit and central ideas" of Mahāyāna derive from the Buddha. According to Suzuki, Mahāyāna evolved and adapted itself to suit the times by developing new teachings and texts, while maintaining the spirit of the Buddha.[156]

Claims of superiority

Mahāyāna often sees itself as penetrating further and more profoundly into the

Buddha's Dharma. An Indian commentary on the Mahāyānasamgraha, gives a classification of teachings according to the capabilities of the audience:[157]

According to disciples' grades, the Dharma is classified as inferior and superior. For example, the inferior was taught to the merchants Traṇḍa and Ballika because they were ordinary men; the middle was taught to the group of five because they were at the stage of saints; the eightfold Prajñāpāramitās were taught to bodhisattvas, and [the Prajñāpāramitās] are superior in eliminating conceptually imagined forms. - Vivṛtaguhyārthapiṇḍavyākhyā

There is also a tendency in Mahāyāna sūtras to regard adherence to these sūtras as generating spiritual benefits greater than those that arise from being a follower of the non-Mahāyāna approaches. Thus the Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra claims that the Buddha said that devotion to Mahāyāna is inherently superior in its virtues to following the śrāvaka or pratyekabuddha paths.[158]

The commentary on the Abhidharmasamuccaya gives the following seven reasons for the "greatness" of the Mahayana:[159]

Greatness of support (ālambana): the path of the bodhisattva is supported by the limitless teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Verses and other texts;

Greatness of practice (pratipatti): the comprehensive practice for the benefit of self and others (sva-para-artha);

Greatness of understanding (jñāna): from understanding the absence of self in persons and phenomena (pudgala-dharma-nairātmya);

Greatness of energy (vīrya): from devotion to many hundreds of thousands of difficult tasks during three incalculable great aeons (mahākalpa);

Greatness of resourcefulness (upāyakaushalya): because of not taking a stand in Saṃsāra or Nirvāṇa;

Greatness of attainment (prāpti): because of the attainment of immeasurable and uncountable powers (bala), confidences (vaiśāradya), and dharmas unique to Buddhas (āveṇika-buddhadharma);

Greatness of deeds (karma): because of willing the performance of the deeds of a Buddha until the end of Saṃsāra by displaying awakening, etc.

Practice

Tibetan Buddhist prayer festival (monlam) at Bodh Gaya

Mahāyāna Buddhist practice is quite varied. A common set of virtues and practices which is shared by all Mahāyāna traditions are the six perfections or transcendent virtues (pāramitā). Another central practice advocated by numerous Mahāyāna sources is focused around "the acquisition of merit, the universal currency of the Buddhist world, a vast quantity of which was believed to be necessary for the attainment of Buddhahood".[160]

Devotion, ritual and meritorious practices

An elderly Tibetan woman with a prayer wheel inscribed with mantras

Devotees chanting before an image of Guanyin (a feminine form of Avalokiteshvara), at Longshan Temple, Taipei, Taiwan.

Indian Mahayana Buddhist practice included numerous elements of devotion and ritual, which were considered to generate much merit (punya) and to allow the devotee to obtain the power or spiritual blessings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. These elements remain a key part of Mahayana Buddhism today. Some key Mahayana practices in this vein include:

Devotion to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: Mahayana bodhisattvas like Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Tara and Amitābha Buddha are central objects of devotion. Practitioners may recite their names or mantras, bow in front of their statues and offer prayers and physical offerings like flowers and incense to receive their blessings, guidance, or assistance in achieving enlightenment or rebirth in a pure land.[161][162][163] In temples and monasteries, offering ceremonies (pūjās) are performed by monks in specific shrines with Buddha statues and other artwork. Donating or contributing money to the building of a Buddha statue or shrine is also another way to practice devotion to these figures.

Formally taking bodhisattva vows (praṇidhāna) which entails formally reciting several vows or resolutions to follow the bodhisattva path.[164]

Text focused practices: The reading, listening to, recitation, memorization, and study of Mahayana sutras, as well as the teaching of their content to others, was major practice in Indian Mahayana and remains influential today.[165] Furthermore, sutra copying, the handwriting of Mahayana sūtra manuscripts (or funding such a project) is also considered a very meritorious act.[166] Sūtra veneration was also practiced, with the physical text treated as a sacred object, often placed on altars, adorned with offerings and communally recited.[167]

Chanting: Buddhist chanting or recitation of sutras, prayers, mantras, and dhāraṇīs is another major ritual element in Mahayana.[168] One text which seems to have been popular in India was the Aspiration Prayer for Good Conduct (Bhadracaryā-praṇidhāna or Samantabhadra-caryā-praṇidhāna).[169] In East Asian Mahayana, one of the most widely chanted texts is the Heart Sutra.

Holy sites and temples: Indian Mahayana Buddhists often performed devotional practices in specific holy sites, which often included stupas, temples, shrines (chaitya) with Buddha statues and other shrines and Buddhist caves. Mahayana temples which focused on housing a central Buddha image became the norm during the Gupta period.[170] Pilgrims would often circumambulate the sites, make offerings of flowers, incense, and light, and engage in acts of reverence such as bowing or prostrating. Buddhist temples, stupas and shrines remain an important element of Mahayana Buddhism.

"Seven part worship" (saptāṅgapūjā or saptavidhā anuttarapūjā), an Indic Mahayana ritual formula which included: vandana (obeisance, bowing) puja (worship), going for refuge, confession of bad deeds (papadesana), rejoicing in merit of all good deeds

(anumodana), prayer (adhyesana) and requesting Buddhas to teach (yacana), atmabhavadi-parityagah (surrender) and pariṇāmanā (the transfer of one's merit to others).[171] These ritual elements remain important in Mahayana Buddhist ritual practice. For example, these elements are incorporated into modern Tibetan Buddhist sadhanas (ritual recitations, meditation rituals) and they are also incorporated into East Asian Buddhist rituals (such as confession rites, and refuge rituals).

The bodhisattva perfections

Mahāyāna sūtras, especially those of the Prajñāpāramitā genre, teach the practice of the six transcendent virtues or perfections (pāramitā) as part of the path to Buddhahood. Special attention is given to transcendent knowledge (prajñāpāramitā), which is seen as a primary virtue.[172] According to Donald S. Lopez Jr., the term pāramitā can mean "excellence" or "perfection" as well as "that which has gone beyond" or "transcendence".[173]

The Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, and a large number of other Mahāyāna texts list six perfections:[174][175][160]

Dāna pāramitā: generosity, charity, giving

Śīla pāramitā: virtue, discipline, proper conduct (see also: Bodhisattva precepts)

Kṣānti pāramitā: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance

Vīrya pāramitā: energy, diligence, vigour, effort

Dhyāna pāramitā: one-pointed concentration, contemplation, meditation

Prajñā pāramitā: transcendent wisdom, spiritual knowledge

This list is also mentioned by the Theravāda commentator Dhammapala, who describes it as a categorization of the same ten perfections of Theravada Buddhism. According to Dhammapala, Sacca is classified as both Śīla and Prajñā, Mettā and Upekkhā are classified as Dhyāna, and Adhiṭṭhāna falls under all six.[175] Bhikkhu Bodhi states that the correlations between the two sets show there was a shared core before the Theravada and Mahayana schools split.[176]

In the Ten Stages Sutra and the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra, four more pāramitās are listed: [107]

7. Upāya pāramitā: skillful means

8. Praṇidhāna pāramitā: vow, resolution, aspiration, determination, this related to the bodhisattva vows

9. Bala pāramitā: spiritual power

10. Jñāna pāramitā: knowledge

Meditation

Japanese Sōtō Zen Buddhist monk meditating and begging for alms at Oigawa, Kyoto.

Zen master Bodhidharma meditating, Ukiyo-e woodblock print by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, 1887

Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches a vast array of meditation practices. These include

meditations which are shared with the early Buddhist traditions, including mindfulness of breathing; mindfulness of the unattractiveness of the body; loving-kindness; the contemplation of dependent origination; and mindfulness of the Buddha.[177][178] In Chinese Buddhism, these five practices are known as the "five methods for stilling or pacifying the mind" and support the development of the stages of dhyana.[179]

The Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra (compiled c. 4th century), which is the most comprehensive Indian treatise on Mahāyāna practice, discusses classic Buddhist numerous meditation methods and topics, including the four dhyānas, the different kinds of samādhi, the development of insight (vipaśyanā) and tranquility (śamatha), the four foundations of mindfulness (smṛtyupasthāna), the five hindrances (nivarāṇa), and classic Buddhist meditations such as the contemplation of unattractiveness, impermanence (anitya), suffering (duḥkha), and contemplation death (maraṇasaṃjñā).[180]

Other works of the Yogācāra school, such as Asaṅga's Abhidharmasamuccaya, and Vasubandhu's Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya also discuss meditation topics such as mindfulness, smṛtyupasthāna, the 37 wings to awakening, and samadhi.[181]

A very popular Mahāyāna practice from very early times involved the visualization of a Buddha while practicing mindfulness of a Buddha (buddhānusmṛti) along with their Pure Land. This practice could lead the meditator to feel that they were in the presence of the Buddha and in some cases it was held that it could lead to visions of the Buddhas, through which one could receive teachings from them.[182]

This meditation is taught in numerous Mahāyāna sūtras such as the Pure Land sutras, the Akṣobhya-vyūha and the Pratyutpanna Samādhi.[183][184] The Pratyutpanna states that through mindfulness of the Buddha meditation one may be able to meet this Buddha in a vision or a dream and learn from them.[185]

Similarly, the Samādhirāja Sūtra for states that:[186]

Those who, while walking, sitting, standing, or sleeping, recollect the moon-like Buddha, will always be in Buddha's presence and will attain the vast nirvāṇa. His pure body is the colour of gold, beautiful is the Protector of the World. Whoever visualizes him like this practises the meditation of the bodhisattvas.

An 18th century Mongolian miniature which depicts a monk generating a tantric visualization

In the case of Pure Land Buddhism, it is widely held that the practice of reciting the Buddha's name (called nianfo in Chinese and nembutsu in Japanese) can lead to rebirth in a Buddha's Pure Land, as well as other positive outcomes. In East Asian Buddhism, the most popular Buddha used for this practice is Amitabha.[182][187]

East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism also teaches numerous unique meditation methods,

including the Chan (Zen) practices of huatou, koan meditation, and silent illumination (Chinese: *mòzhào*, which developed into the Japanese *shikantaza* method). Indo-Tibetan Buddhism also includes numerous unique forms of Mahāyāna contemplations, such as tonglen ("sending and receiving"), lojong ("mind training") and samatha-vipasyana.

There are also numerous meditative practices that are generally considered to be part of a separate category rather than general or mainstream Mahāyāna meditation. These are the various practices associated with Vajrayāna (also termed Mantrayāna, Secret Mantra, Buddhist Tantra, and Esoteric Buddhism). This family of practices, which include such varied forms as Deity Yoga, Dzogchen, Mahamudra, the Six Dharmas of Nāropa, the recitation of mantras and dharanis, and the use of mudras and mandalas, are very important in Tibetan Buddhism as well as in some forms of East Asian Mantrayāna like Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, Shingon, and Tendai.

Scripture

Astasahasrika Prajñāparamita Manuscript. Prajñāparamita and Scenes from the Buddha's Life (top), Maitreya and Scenes from the Buddha's Life (bottom), c. 1075

Frontispiece of the Chinese Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, the oldest known dated printed book in the world

Mahāyāna Buddhism takes the basic teachings of the Buddha as recorded in early scriptures as the starting point of its teachings, such as those concerning karma and rebirth, anātman, emptiness, dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths.

Mahāyāna Buddhists in East Asia have traditionally studied these teachings in the Āgamas preserved in the Chinese Buddhist canon. "Āgama" is the term used by those traditional Buddhist schools in India who employed Sanskrit for their basic canon. These correspond to the Nikāyas used by the Theravāda school.[188]

The surviving Āgamas in Chinese translation belong to at least two schools. Most of the Āgamas were never translated into the Tibetan canon, which according to Hirakawa, only contains a few translations of early sutras corresponding to the Nikāyas or Āgamas. [189] However, these basic doctrines are contained in Tibetan translations of later works such as the Abhidharmakośa and the Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra.

Mahāyāna sutras

Main article: Mahayana sutras

In addition to accepting the essential scriptures of the early Buddhist schools as valid, Mahāyāna Buddhism maintains large collections of sūtras that are not recognized as authentic by the modern Theravāda school. The earliest of these sutras do not call themselves 'Mahāyāna', but use the terms vaipulya (extensive) sutras, or gambhira (profound) sutras.[38] These were also not recognized by some individuals in the early Buddhist schools. In other cases, Buddhist communities such as the Mahāsāṃghika school were divided along these doctrinal lines.[146]

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Mahāyāna sūtras are often given greater authority than the Āgamas. The first of these Mahāyāna-specific writings were written probably around the 1st century BCE or 1st-century CE.[190][191] Some influential Mahāyāna sutras are the Prajñāparamita sutras such as the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, the Lotus Sutra, the Pure Land sutras, the Vimalakīrti Sutra, the Golden Light Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Sandhinirmocana Sutra and the Tathāgatagarbha sūtras.

According to David Drewes, Mahāyāna sutras contain several elements besides the promotion of the bodhisattva ideal, including "expanded cosmologies and mythical histories, ideas of purelands and great, 'celestial' Buddhas and bodhisattvas, descriptions of powerful new religious practices, new ideas on the nature of the Buddha, and a range of new philosophical perspectives." [38] These texts present stories of revelation in which the Buddha teaches Mahāyāna sutras to certain bodhisattvas who vow to teach and spread these sutras after the Buddha's death.[38]

Regarding religious praxis, David Drewes outlines the most commonly promoted practices in Mahāyāna sutras were seen as means to achieve Buddhahood quickly and easily and included "hearing the names of certain Buddhas or bodhisattvas, maintaining Buddhist precepts, and listening to, memorizing, and copying sutras, that they claim can enable rebirth in the pure lands Abhirati and Sukhavati, where it is said to be possible to easily acquire the merit and knowledge necessary to become a Buddha in as little as one lifetime." [38] Another widely recommended practice is anumodana, or rejoicing in the good deeds of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The practice of meditation and visualization of Buddhas has been seen by some scholars as a possible explanation for the source of certain Mahāyāna sutras which are seen traditionally as direct visionary revelations from the Buddhas in their pure lands. Paul Harrison has also noted the importance of dream revelations in certain Mahāyāna sutras such as the Arya-svapna-nirdeśa which lists and interprets 108 dream signs.[192]

As noted by Paul Williams, one feature of Mahāyāna sutras (especially earlier ones) is "the phenomenon of laudatory self-reference – the lengthy praise of the sutra itself, the immense merits to be obtained from treating even a verse of it with reverence, and the nasty penalties which will accrue in accordance with karma to those who denigrate the scripture." [193] Some Mahāyāna sutras also warn against the accusation that they are not the word of the Buddha (buddhavaśana), such as the Aṣṭasāhasrikā (8,000 verse) Prajñāpāramitā, which states that such claims come from Mara (the evil tempter).[194] Some of these Mahāyāna sutras also warn those who would denigrate Mahāyāna sutras or those who preach it (i.e. the dharmabhanaka) that this action can lead to rebirth in hell.[195]

Another feature of some Mahāyāna sutras, especially later ones, is increasing sectarianism and animosity towards non-Mahāyāna practitioners (sometimes called śravakas, "hearers") which are sometimes depicted as being part of the 'hīnayāna' (the

'inferior way') who refuse to accept the 'superior way' of the Mahāyāna.[92][104] As noted by Paul Williams, earlier Mahāyāna sūtras like the Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra and the Ajitasena sūtra do not present any antagonism towards the hearers or the ideal of arhatship like later sūtras do.[104] Regarding the bodhisattva path, some Mahāyāna sūtras promote it as a universal path for everyone, while others like the Ugraparipṛcchā see it as something for a small elite of hardcore ascetics.[104]

In the 4th-century Mahāyāna Abhidharma work Abhidharmasamuccaya, Asaṅga refers to the collection which contains the āgamas as the Śrāvakaṭṭhaka and associates it with the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas.[196] Asaṅga classifies the Mahāyāna sūtras as belonging to the Bodhisattvaṭṭhaka, which is designated as the collection of teachings for bodhisattvas.[196]

Other literature

Mahāyāna Buddhism also developed a massive commentarial and exegetical literature, many of which are called śāstra (treatises) or vṛttis (commentaries). Philosophical texts were also written in verse form (karikās), such as in the case of the famous Mūlamadhyamika-karikā (Root Verses on the Middle Way) by Nagarjuna, the foundational text of Madhyamika philosophy. Numerous later Madhyamika philosophers like Candrakīrti wrote commentaries on this work as well as their own verse works.

Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition also relies on numerous non-Mahayana commentaries (śāstra), a very influential one being the Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu, which is written from a non-Mahayana Sarvastivada–Sautrantika perspective.

Vasubandhu is also the author of various Mahāyāna Yogacara texts on the philosophical theory known as vijñapti-matra (conscious construction only). The Yogacara school philosopher Asanga is also credited with numerous highly influential commentaries. In East Asia, the Satyasiddhi śāstra was also influential.

Another influential tradition is that of Dignāga's Buddhist logic whose work focused on epistemology. He produced the Pramāṇasamuccaya, and later Dharmakīrti wrote the Pramānavārttikā, which was a commentary and reworking of the Dignaga text.

Later Tibetan and Chinese Buddhists continued the tradition of writing commentaries.

Classifications

Dating back at least to the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra is a classification of the corpus of Buddhism into three categories, based on ways of understanding the nature of reality, known as the "Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel". According to this view, there were three such "turnings":[197]

In the first turning, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths at Varanasi for those in the śrāvaka vehicle. It is described as marvelous and wonderful, but requires interpretation and occasioning controversy.[198] The doctrines of the first turning are exemplified in

the Dharmacakra Pravartana Sūtra. This turning represents the earliest phase of the Buddhist teachings and the earliest period in the history of Buddhism.

In the second turning, the Buddha taught the Mahāyāna teachings to the bodhisattvas, teaching that all phenomena have no-essence, no arising, no passing away, are originally quiescent, and essentially in cessation. This turning is also described as marvelous and wonderful, but requiring interpretation and occasioning controversy.[198] Doctrine of the second turning is established in the Prajñāpāramitā teachings, first put into writing around 100 BCE. In Indian philosophical schools, it is exemplified by the Mādhyamaka school of Nāgārjuna.

In the third turning, the Buddha taught similar teachings to the second turning, but for everyone in the three vehicles, including all the śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas. These were meant to be completely explicit teachings in their entire detail, for which interpretations would not be necessary, and controversy would not occur.[198] These teachings were established by the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra as early as the 1st or 2nd century CE.[199] In the Indian philosophical schools, the third turning is exemplified by the Yogācāra school of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.

Some traditions of Tibetan Buddhism consider the teachings of Esoteric Buddhism and Vajrayāna to be the third turning of the Dharma Wheel.[200] Tibetan teachers, particularly of the Gelugpa school, regard the second turning as the highest teaching, because of their particular interpretation of Yogācāra doctrine. The Buddha Nature teachings are normally included in the third turning of the wheel.[citation needed]

The different Chinese Buddhist traditions have different schemes of doctrinal periodization called *panjiao* which they use to organize the sometimes bewildering array of texts.

Relationship with the early texts

Scholars have noted that many key Mahāyāna ideas are closely connected to the earliest texts of Buddhism. The seminal work of Mahāyāna philosophy, Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, mentions the canon's *Katyāyana Sūtra* (SA 301) by name, and may be an extended commentary on that work.[201] Nāgārjuna systematized the Mādhyamaka school of Mahāyāna philosophy. He may have arrived at his positions from a desire to achieve a consistent exegesis of the Buddha's doctrine as recorded in the canon. In his eyes, the Buddha was not merely a forerunner, but the very founder of the Mādhyamaka system.[202] Nāgārjuna also referred to a passage in the canon regarding "nirvanic consciousness" in two different works.[203]

Yogācāra, the other prominent Mahāyāna school in dialectic with the Mādhyamaka school, gave a special significance to the canon's *Lesser Discourse on Emptiness* (MA 190).[204] A passage there (which the discourse itself emphasizes) is often quoted in later Yogācāra texts as a true definition of emptiness.[205] According to Walpola Rahula, the thought presented in the Yogācāra school's *Abhidharma-samuccaya* is undeniably closer to that of the Pali Nikayas than is that of the Theravadin *Abhidhamma*. [206]

Both the Mādhyamikas and the Yogācārins saw themselves as preserving the Buddhist

Middle Way between the extremes of nihilism (everything as unreal) and substantialism (substantial entities existing). The Yogācārins criticized the Mādhyamikas for tending towards nihilism, while the Mādhyamikas criticized the Yogācārins for tending towards substantialism.[207]

Key Mahāyāna texts introducing the concepts of bodhicitta and Buddha nature also use language parallel to passages in the canon containing the Buddha's description of "luminous mind" and appear to have evolved from this idea.[208][209]

Contemporary forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism

Map showing the three major Buddhist divisions

The main contemporary traditions of Mahāyāna in Asia are:

The East Asian Mahāyāna traditions of China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, also known as "Eastern Buddhism". Peter Harvey estimates that there are about 360 million Eastern Buddhists in Asia.[210]

The Indo-Tibetan tradition (Vajrayana Buddhism, mainly found in Tibet, Inner Mongolia and elsewhere in Western China, Mongolia, Bhutan, parts of India, Nepal and Russia, also known as "Northern Buddhism". According to Harvey "the number of people belonging to Northern Buddhism totals only around 18.2 million." [211]

There are also some minor Mahāyāna traditions practiced by minority groups, such as Newar Buddhism practiced by the Newar people (Nepal) and Azhaliism practiced by the Bai people (Yunnan).

Furthermore, there are also various new religious movements which either see themselves as Mahāyāna or are strongly influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhism. Examples of these include Hòa Hảo, Won Buddhism, Triratna Buddhist Community and Sōka Gakkai.

Lastly, there are various East Asian religious traditions which are strongly influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhism, though they may not be considered as being "Buddhist" per se. These include: Bon, Shugendo, Mongolian Yellow shamanism, Syncretized Shinto (shinbutsu-shūgō) and some of the Chinese salvationist religions.

Most of the major forms of contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhism are also practiced by Asian immigrant populations in the West and also by western convert Buddhists. For more on this topic see: Buddhism in the West.

Chinese

Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum, Taiwan

Contemporary Han Chinese Buddhism is practiced through many varied forms, such as Chan (Zen), Pure land, Tiantai, Huayan and mantra practices. This group is the largest population of Buddhists in the world. There are between 228 and 239 million Mahāyāna

Buddhists in the People's Republic of China. This does not include the Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhists who practice Tibetan Buddhism.[210]

Harvey gives the East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist population in other countries as follows: Taiwanese Buddhists, 8 million; Malaysian Buddhists, 5.5 million; Singaporean Buddhists, 1.5 million; Hong Kong, 0.7 million; Indonesian Buddhists, 4 million, The Philippines: 2.3 million.[210] Most of these are Han Chinese populations.

Chinese Buddhism can be divided into various different traditions (zong), such as Sanlun, Faxiang, Tiantai, Huayan, Pure Land, Chan, and Zhenyan. However, historically, most temples, institutions and Buddhist practitioners usually did not belong to any single "sect" (as is common in Japanese Buddhism), but draw from the various different elements of Chinese Buddhist thought and practice. This non-sectarian and eclectic aspect of Chinese Buddhism as a whole has persisted from its historical beginnings into its modern practice.[212][213]

The modern development of an ideology called Humanistic Buddhism (Chinese: 人間佛教; pinyin: rénjiān fójiào, more literally "Buddhism for the Human World") has also been influential on Chinese Buddhist leaders and institutions.[214] Chinese Buddhists may also practice some form of religious syncretism with other Chinese religions, such as Taoism.[215] In modern China, the reform and opening up period in the late 20th century saw a particularly significant increase in the number of converts to Chinese Buddhism, a growth which has been called "extraordinary".[216]

Korean

Korean Buddhism is dominated by the Korean Seon school (i.e. Zen), primarily represented by the Jogye Order and the Taego Order. Korean Seon also includes some Pure Land practice.[217] It is mainly practiced in South Korea, with a rough population of about 10.9 million Buddhists.[210] There are also some minor Korean schools, such as the Cheontae (i.e. Korean Tiantai), and the esoteric Jingak and Chinŏn schools.

While North Korea's totalitarian government remains repressive and ambivalent towards religion, at least 11 percent of the population is considered to be Buddhist according to Williams.[218]

Japanese

Japanese Buddhism is divided into numerous traditions which include various sects of Pure Land Buddhism (the largest being Shin and Jodo), Tendai, Nichiren Buddhism, Shingon and three major sects of Zen (Soto, Rinzai and Obaku). There are also various Mahāyāna oriented Japanese new religions that arose in the post-war period. Many of these new religions are lay movements like Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōsei Kai and Agon Shū.[219]

An estimate of the Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhist population is given by Harvey as 52 million and a recent 2018 survey puts the number at 84 million.[210][220] It should also

be noted that many Japanese Buddhists also participate in Shinto practices, such as visiting shrines, collecting amulets and attending festivals.[221]

Vietnamese

Vietnamese Buddhism is strongly influenced by the Chinese tradition. It is a synthesis of numerous practices and ideas. Vietnamese Mahāyāna draws practices from Vietnamese Thiền (Chan/Zen), Tịnh độ (Pure Land), and Mật Tông (Mantrayana) and its philosophy from Hoa Nghiêm (Huayan) and Thiên Thai (Tiantai).[222] New Mahāyāna movements have also developed in the modern era, perhaps the most influential of which has been Thích Nhất Hạnh's Plum Village Tradition, which also draws from Theravada Buddhism.

Though Vietnamese Buddhism suffered extensively during the Vietnam war (1955–1975) and during subsequent communist takeover of the south, there has been a revival of the religion since the liberalization period following 1986. There are about 43 million Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhists.[210]

Tibetan

The 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso with Desmond Tutu in 2004. Due to his charisma, the Dalai Lama has become the international face of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism[223]

Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism or "Northern" Buddhism derives from the Indian Vajrayana Buddhism that was adopted in medieval Tibet. Though it includes numerous tantric Buddhist practices not found in East Asian Mahāyāna, Northern Buddhism still considers itself as part of Mahāyāna Buddhism (albeit as one which also contains a more effective and distinct vehicle or yana).

Contemporary Northern Buddhism is traditionally practiced mainly in the Himalayan regions and in some regions of North Central Asia, including:[224]

The Tibet autonomous region (PRC): 5.4 million

North and North-east India (Sikkim, Ladakh, West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir): 0.4 million

Pakistan: 0.16 million

Nepal: 2.9 million

Bhutan: 0.49 million

Mongolia: 2.7 million

Inner Mongolia (PRC): 5 million

Buryatia, Tuva and Kalmykia (Russian Federation): 0.7 million

As with Eastern Buddhism, the practice of northern Buddhism declined in Tibet, China and Mongolia during the communist takeover of these regions (Mongolia: 1924, Tibet: 1959). Tibetan Buddhism continued to be practiced among the Tibetan diaspora population, as well as by other Himalayan peoples in Bhutan, Ladakh and Nepal.

Post-1980s though, Northern Buddhism has seen a revival in both Tibet and Mongolia

due to more liberal government policies towards religious freedom.[225] Northern Buddhism is also now practiced in the Western world by western convert Buddhists.

Relationship to the Theravada school

Main article: Theravada

Role of the Bodhisattva

In the early Buddhist texts, and as taught by the modern Theravada school, the goal of becoming a teaching Buddha in a future life is viewed as the aim of a small group of individuals striving to benefit future generations after the current Buddha's teachings have been lost, but in the current age there is no need for most practitioners to aspire to this goal. Theravada texts do, however, hold that this is a more perfectly virtuous goal. [226]

Paul Williams writes that some modern Theravada meditation masters in Thailand are popularly regarded as bodhisattvas.[227]

Cholvijarn observes that prominent figures associated with the Self perspective in Thailand have often been famous outside scholarly circles as well, among the wider populace, as Buddhist meditation masters and sources of miracles and sacred amulets. Like perhaps some of the early Mahāyāna forest hermit monks, or the later Buddhist Tantrics, they have become people of power through their meditative achievements. They are widely revered, worshipped, and held to be arhats or (note!) bodhisattvas.

Theravāda and Hīnayāna

In the 7th century, the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang describes the concurrent existence of the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagiri Vihāra in Sri Lanka. He refers to the monks of the Mahāvihāra as the "Hīnayāna Sthaviras" (Theras), and the monks of the Abhayagiri Vihāra as the "Mahāyāna Sthaviras".[228] Xuanzang further writes:[229]

The Mahāvihāravāsins reject the Mahāyāna and practice the Hīnayāna, while the Abhayagirivihāravāsins study both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna teachings and propagate the Tripiṭaka.

The modern Theravāda school is usually described as belonging to Hīnayāna.[230][231][232][233][234] Some authors have argued that it should not be considered such from the Mahāyāna perspective. Their view is based on a different understanding of the concept of Hīnayāna. Rather than regarding the term as referring to any school of Buddhism that has not accepted the Mahāyāna canon and doctrines, such as those pertaining to the role of the bodhisattva,[231][233] these authors argue that the classification of a school as "Hīnayāna" should be crucially dependent on the adherence to a specific phenomenological position. They point out that unlike the now-extinct Sarvāstivāda school, which was the primary object of Mahāyāna criticism, the Theravāda does not claim the existence of independent entities (dharmas); in this it maintains the attitude of early Buddhism.[235][236][237]

Adherents of Mahāyāna Buddhism disagreed with the substantialist thought of the Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntikas, and in emphasizing the doctrine of emptiness, Kalupahana holds that they endeavored to preserve the early teaching.[238] The Theravādins too refuted the Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntikas (and other schools) on the grounds that their theories were in conflict with the non-substantialism of the canon. The Theravāda arguments are preserved in the Kathāvatthu.[239]

Some contemporary Theravādin figures have indicated a sympathetic stance toward the Mahāyāna philosophy found in texts such as the Heart Sūtra (Skt. Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya) and Nāgārjuna's Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way (Skt. Mūlamadhyamakakārikā).[240][241]

See also

Buddha-nature

Buddhist holidays

Creator in Buddhism

Dzogchen

Early Buddhist schools

Faith in Buddhism

Golden Light Sutra

History of Buddhism

Index of Buddhism-related articles

Lotus Sutra

Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra

Mahayana sutras

Pure land

Rebirth

Schools of Buddhism

Secular Buddhism

Silk Road transmission of Buddhism

Śūnyatā

Tendai

Tibetan Buddhism

Zen

Notes

Mahāyāna; /ˌmɑːhəˈjɑːnə/ MAH-hə-YAH-nə; Sanskrit: महायान, pronounced [məɦaːˈjaːnə], lit. 'Great Vehicle'; Chinese: 大乘; Vietnamese: Đại thừa

"The Mahayana, 'Great Vehicle' or 'Great Carriage' (for carrying all beings to nirvana), is also, and perhaps more correctly and accurately, known as the Bodhisattvayana, the bodhisattva's vehicle." Warder, A.K. (3rd edn. 1999). Indian Buddhism: p. 338

Karashima: "I have assumed that, in the earliest stage of the transmission of the Lotus Sūtra, the Middle Indic form jāṇa or *jāna (Pkt < Skt jñāna, yāna) had stood in these places ... I have assumed, further, that the Mahāyānist terms buddha-yānā ("the Buddha-vehicle"), mahāyāna ("the great vehicle"), hīnayāna ("the inferior vehicle")

meant originally buddha-jñāna ("buddha-knowledge"), mahājñāna ("great knowledge") and hīnajñāna ("inferior knowledge")." Karashima, Seishi (2001). Some features of the Language of the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 44: 207–230

Warder: "The sudden appearance of large numbers of (Mahayana) teachers and texts (in North India in the second century AD) would seem to require some previous preparation and development, and this we can look for in the South." Warder, A.K. (3rd edn. 1999). *Indian Buddhism*: p. 335.

"The most important evidence – in fact the only evidence – for situating the emergence of the Mahayana around the beginning of the common era was not Indian evidence at all, but came from China. Already by the last quarter of the 2nd century CE, there was a small, seemingly idiosyncratic collection of substantial Mahayana sutras translated into what Erik Zürcher calls 'broken Chinese' by an Indoscythian, whose Indian name has been reconstructed as Lokaksema." *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004): p. 492

"Certainly, we have for this period an extensive body of inscriptions from virtually all parts of India. ... But nowhere in this extensive body of material is there any reference, prior to the fifth century, to a named Mahāyāna.", *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004): p. 493

"What is particularly disconcerting here is the disconnect between expectation and reality: We know from Chinese translations that large numbers of Mahāyāna sutras were being composed in the period between the beginning of the common era and the fifth century. But outside of texts, at least in India, at exactly the same period, very different – in fact seemingly older – ideas and aspirations appear to be motivating actual behavior, and old and established Hinayana groups appear to be the only ones that are patronized and supported., *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004): p. 494

"In other words, once nontextual evidence is taken into account the picture changes dramatically. Rather than being datable to the beginning of the common era, this strand of Mahayana Buddhism, at least, appeared to have no visible impact on Indian Buddhist cult practice until the 2nd century, and even then what impact it had was extremely isolated and marginal, and had no lasting or long-term consequences – there were no further references to Amitabha in Indian image inscriptions. Almost exactly the same pattern occurs (concerning Mahayana) on an even broader scale when nontextual evidence is considered." *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004): p. 493

"There are, it seems, very few things that can be said with certainty about Mahayana Buddhism...But apart from the fact that it can be said with some certainty that the Buddhism embedded in China, Korea, Tibet, and Japan is Mahayana Buddhism, it is no longer clear what else can be said with certainty about Mahayana Buddhism itself, and especially about its earlier, and presumably formative, period in India.", *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004): p. 492

"It has become increasingly clear that Mahayana Buddhism was never one thing, but rather, it seems, a loosely bound bundle of many, and – like Walt Whitman – was large and could contain, in both senses of the term, contradictions, or at least antipodal elements." *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004): p. 492

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《增一阿含經·勸請品·八經》：「爾時，尊者拘絺羅便說此偈：『種種果不同，眾生趣亦然，自覺覺人者，我無此辯說。禪智解脫辯，憶本天眼通，能盡苦原本，我無此辯說。』爾時，須深女人便說此偈：『善逝有此智，質直無瑕穢，勇猛有所伏，求於大乘行。』」

印順《雜阿含經部類之整編》：「宋譯《雜阿含經》，譯出的時代遲了些，而譯者求那

跋陀羅，是一位唯心大乘師，所以譯文中偶有大乘的名義。……「菩薩摩訶薩」的稱呼，受到了大乘的影響。不過，每成立一部派，就有部派所審定集成的經典，在傳承的同一宗派中，是不可能大事更張的。《雜阿含經》的「修多羅」部分，與『攝事分』所依經本一致，即可以證明。當然，經典在長期流傳中，會因時因地而有多少差別的。求那跋陀羅為唯心大乘師，所譯《雜阿含經》，就偶有一二大乘名義，然如依此而說宋譯《雜阿含經》，是大乘佛教時代所完成的，那就誤謬不經了！」

吳汝鈞《印度大乘佛教思想的特色》：「『阿含經』用「大乘」之名，大抵指佛的教法，而含有尊崇之意。這「大乘」自不同於爾後大乘佛教的「大乘」，但亦非全不相通。大乘佛教自有其發展，但其基本教理，並不遠離佛的本意。」

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"One of the most frequent assertions about the Mahayana is that it was a lay-influenced, or even lay-inspired and dominated, movement that arose in response to the increasingly closed, cold, and scholastic character of monastic Buddhism. This, however, now appears to be wrong on all counts...much of its [Hinayana's] program being in fact intended and designed to allow laymen and women and donors the opportunity and means to make religious merit." Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism (2004): p. 494

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Theravada | Lion's Roar

Theravada, meaning "Way of the Elders," is the oldest surviving school of Buddhism, emphasizing the Buddha's original teachings preserved in the Pali Canon, focusing on individual liberation (Arhatship) through diligent meditation, ethical conduct (Vinaya), and wisdom, central to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, often called "Southern Buddhism". It stresses self-effort, mindfulness, and understanding impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta) to attain Nirvana.

Core Beliefs & Practices

Pali Canon: The authoritative scriptures in the Pali language, containing the Buddha's discourses (Sutta Pitaka), monastic rules (Vinaya Pitaka), and philosophical analyses (Abhidhamma Pitaka).

Arhat Ideal: The spiritual goal is to become an Arhat, one who achieves personal enlightenment by ending suffering and the cycle of rebirth (samsara).

Meditation: Key practices include concentration (samatha) and insight (vipassanā) meditation to directly experience reality.

Karma: Actions (body, speech, mind) bear fruit; skillful actions lead to happiness, unskillful ones to suffering.

Lifestyle

Monasticism: A strong emphasis on monastic life (bhikkhus and bhikkhunis) as the ideal path, with monks following strict rules (227 for monks).

Lay Support: Lay followers support the monastics with alms, food, and robes, receiving spiritual guidance in return.

Daily Life: Monks typically eat only between dawn and noon and may wander (tudong) for solitary retreat.

Geographic Spread

Heartlands: Predominantly practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

History: Spread from India to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and then to mainland Southeast Asia, absorbing local traditions.

Key Concepts

Nirvana (Nibbana): The ultimate goal of liberation from ignorance, craving, and suffering.

Three Jewels: Taking refuge in the Buddha (the awakened one), Dhamma (the teachings), and Sangha (the community).

Buddhist Studies: What is Theravada Buddhism? - BuddhaNet

The language of the Theravada canonical texts is Pali, a relative of Magadhi, the language probably spoken in central India during...

buddhanet.net

Why Theravada? - Reddit

Feb 24, 2021 — As far as I can see, Theravada is the Buddhism as taught by the Buddha himself. So if the Pali canon resonated with yo...

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Wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org › wiki › Theravada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theravada)

Theravāda is the official religion of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Cambodia, and the main dominant Buddhist variant found in Laos and Thailand.

People also ask

What are Theravada Buddhism beliefs?

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Is India Theravada or Mahayana?

What makes Theravada Buddhism unique?

Feedback

What is Theravada Buddhism?

Access to Insight

[https://www.accesstoinight.org › theravada](https://www.accesstoinight.org/theravada)

Theravada (pronounced — more or less the "Doctrine of the Elders," is the school of Buddhism that draws its scriptural inspiration from the Tipitaka, or Pali ...

Theravada Buddhism

BBC

[https://www.bbc.co.uk › subdivisions › theravada_1](https://www.bbc.co.uk/subdivisions/theravada_1)

Oct 2, 2002 — Theravada Buddhism is strongest in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand,

Laos and Burma (Myanmar). It is sometimes called Southern Buddhism and is one of the largest ...

Things to know

Ultimate Goal

.

What is the ultimate goal of Theravada Buddhism?

Pali Canon

.

What is the Pali Canon in Theravada Buddhism?

Theravada | Monasticism, Meditation & Philosophy

Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com> › ... › Religious Beliefs

Nov 7, 2025 — Theravada, major form of Buddhism prevalent in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

Buddhist Studies: What is Theravada Buddhism?

buddhanet.net

<https://www.buddhanet.net> › ... › Buddhist World

Theravada (Pali: therā “elders” + vada “word, doctrine”), the “Doctrine of the Elders,” is the name for the school of Buddhism

Videos

Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism (video)

Khan Academy · Khan Academy

May 2, 2017

Khan Academy · Khan Academy

7:33

Buddhism has 2 major schools: Theravada (personal journey) and Mahayana (help others).

The Ancient Teachings Of Theravāda Buddhism

YouTube · Asangoham

Feb 14, 2023

YouTube · Asangoham

24:05

Theravada Buddhism, the oldest school of Buddhism, emphasizes individual spiritual progress and the attainment of enlightenment through personal effort and self-cultivation.

Theravada Buddhism | Definition, Beliefs & Traditions - Video

Study.com

Jan 20, 2024

Study.com

4:20

Learn about Theravada Buddhism, the older of two major Buddhist traditions, and its path to Nirvana through rigorous practice and becoming a perfected being.

Feedback

View all

What is Theravada Buddhism? A scholar of Asian religions ...

The Conversation

<https://theconversation.com/what-is-theravada-buddhi...>

May 31, 2023 — Theravada, which means “the way of the elders,” is one of the two main schools of Buddhism. Its adherents consider Theravada to be the most authoritative ...

Why Theravada?

Reddit · r/theravada

40+ comments · 4 years ago

Theravada is the Buddhism as taught by the Buddha himself. In Theravada, it is a path to freedom.

43 answers

.

Top answer:

Lucky enough to be born into it and looked at other branches and didn't find any reasons to ...

How much of Buddhism is Theravada?

57 answers

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Theravada Buddhism and Zen Buddhism; what is the ...

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Theravada: The Way of the Elders

The Pluralism Project

<https://pluralism.org/theravada-the-way-of-the-elders>

The Theravada, literally “The Way of the Elders,” is the school of Buddhism most prominent today in the countries of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka.

What people are saying

Mahayana vs. Theravada on Dependent Origination

Popular comment · They're not different. The teaching is essentially the same.

Theravada study of the Pali Canon won't be quite the same, with the same emphases, as Mahayana training, but they contain the same basic teachings. The difference is more the context. In Mahayana, the shravaka teachings that Theravada regards as Buddhist scripture are regarded as only the first step of practice. With entrance into the specifically Mahayana teachings, such as the heart sutra, there's a radical change in

View. The heart sutra presents the teaching on shunyata or emptiness. Pratityasamutpada says nothing exists on its own because all phenomena arise dependent on each other. A typical example is to look at a car. If you take off pieces, when does it cease to be a car? The fenders? The roof? The engine? The seats? What's the essence of carness? That's a kind of thought experiment that shows how we experience a charged projection rather than actual objects. It's a way to help reduce attachment to apparent solidity and to see how self is also a changeable composite. Shunyata is coming at it on a less dualistic level. It's pointing out that experience itself is ungraspable. Self and other are both empty of existence. Phenomena appear, yet have no substance. Form is empty and emptiness is also form. Vivid appearance yet ungraspable. In a way you could say it's the ultimate conclusion of pratityasamutpada's logic. So pratityasamutpada is looking at it in dualistic terms, ego's point of view. It's saying that what you think is solid actually isn't. Dualistic perception is the reference point. Mahayana schools teach the same thing, but then introduce shunyata as the view of post-realization. Shunyata is looking at it from the point of view of actually realizing emptiness. It's saying, "Look, you have to give up all reference points. That's the deal. There isn't even a self to lose. There isn't even loss. There's no samsara, no nirvana, no buddha, no enlightenment, nada. You don't get to have any bearings. No up or down, back or forward. That's dualistic mind. There's only the wisdom of seeing that." As it says in the heart sutra, "Since the bodhisattvas have no attainment, they abide by means of prajnaparamita." In Theravada, as I understand it, the word emptiness is used to refer to pratityasamutpada and Mahayana emptiness, shunyata, is not recognized at all. That can be a bit confusing. There are numerous shared terms that mean very different things in one school than they do in the other.

30+ comments · 1 week ago

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Reddit

21:32
Theravada Buddhism | Exploring The Buddha's Wisdom in Southeast Asia
130+ views · 3 weeks ago

Conscious Collective
YouTube

How to let go?

Popular comment · The Buddha taught that clinging is the reason for suffering and the way to let go is the 8 fold path. That's the 4 noble truths. But I'm sure you know that. I've been practicing for 20 years and gone down a few routes, good and not so good. These are the best, most important things to keep in mind along the way. Understand that suffering will continue until full awakening. It will only improve over time. Reflect on your improvements along the way, to keep energised about your practice. Your improvement can easily be gauged by depth of meditation. If you are on the right track, you

meditations will go deeper and faster. You will get stagnated from time to time. Then you need to make life changes or learn more. I had slow progress for the first 10 years, then a great spurt. Because suffering continues even past stream entry, always be kind and compassionate to yourself. You will make a million mistakes in life. Learn, forgive, use kindness, move on. Don't create your own hell with regrets. While there is extreme joy to be had, the natural state is peace. Don't spend time looking for some permanent bliss. We have a body and it experiences worldly aches and pains. Though we aren't the owner of these. Truly, deeply, know: there is nothing out there that will make you truly happy. Every worldly achievement and pleasure will only be temporary and worse yet, will leave you wanting more. This will allow you to pursue deeper meditation with a higher priority. We actually let go of things naturally. Given time, there's not a lot bar some of the most important things we cling to throughout our lives. Do you still cling to the kid in school who called you names? Or maybe you called him names? I'm sure you, and he/she could not give a shit. It's a memory. This applies to all, time, forgiveness, compassion, wisdom can break all clinging. If we have little wisdom, we need a lot of time. If we have a lot of wisdom, we need little time. Wisdom is knowing a peaceful mind, and having the skill to maintain it in all occasions. Also having the skill to make those around you be at peace. Truly know there is nothing in the world worth breaking peace. I don't normally write so much but there you go. Hopefully something there is useful.

·
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0:10

In Theravāda Buddhism, devotion (saddhā) means confidence in the Buddha (the fully awakened teacher), the Dhamma (the teaching), and Sangha (the community of practitioners who have realized the teachings). It's not blind faith, but trust born from reflection and experience. Through practice, offerings, and recollection, devotion inspires gratitude, joy, and steadiness on the path to liberation.

820+ likes · Sep 26, 2025

accanta_santi
Instagram

Mind blown! Pali, the ancient language of Theravada Buddhism, doesn't have its own script! Check out how Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos each write it using their unique scripts. #PaliLanguage #TheravadaBuddhism #Linguistics #Lan
100+ reactions · Oct 11, 2025

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0:48

Anger in Theravada, Mahayana & Vajrayana

27.2K+ views · Oct 2, 2025

Perfect Teacher 上師言教 · YouTube

Buddhist teachings sharing channel

Mahayana Buddhists why did you choose Mahayana over theravada?

Popular comment · Any answer I give will probably be wrong, since it is easy to falsify memories of one's intellectual and affective developments. But if I were to make an attempt: When I first started practicing Buddhism, I was a Theravāda Buddhist, and thought Mahāyāna seemed a bit ridiculous, but then I met a Mahāyāna nun who impressed me and also read an article about Nāgārjuna around the same time, and those two things I think didn't immediately make me want to be a Mahāyāna Buddhist, but they made it seem less ridiculous to me. Then, I read Vasubandhu's Viṃśikā and realized that the Buddhists who were developing compelling intellectual resources to actually defend the reasonableness of accepting a Buddhist worldview of any kind were mostly Mahāyāna Buddhists, and for many aspects of the Buddhist worldview, were exclusively Mahāyāna Buddhists. And this made me want to be an inheritor of that intellectual tradition. And then I read Śāntideva's Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra and that text made me want to be an inheritor of that practical tradition as well, since I was impressed enough with the sort of Buddhist practitioner Śāntideva aspirationally describes in that text that stirrings of similar aspirations arose for me. So it was a matter of realizing that the visions of Buddhist thought and practice outlined by the most famous Mahāyāna Buddhist writers seemed most intellectually and practically appealing to me. But if I had to explain what all I found and still find intellectually and practically appealing about Mahāyāna thought and practice, it wouldn't fit in a Reddit comment.

.

50+ comments · 1 month ago

r/Mahayana

Reddit

1:01

Hiếu gì về Nguyên Thủy hay Chơn Chư không hả 2 thằng phản thầy #thíchthônglạc #thichmathanh

1.3K+ views · 1 month ago

Thích Thiện Tài Đạo Tràng Bát Nhã

YouTube

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Theravāda is Buddhism's oldest existing school. The school's adherents, termed Theravādins, have preserved their version of the Buddha's teaching or Dhamma in the Pāli Canon for over two millennia.

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Theravāda[b] is Buddhism's oldest existing school.[1][2] The school's adherents, termed Theravādins (anglicized from Pali *theravādī*),[3][4] have preserved their version of the Buddha's teaching or Dhamma in the Pāli Canon for over two millennia.[1][2][web 1] As of 2010, Theravada is the second largest branch of Buddhism with 36% Buddhists belonging to Theravada, compared to 53% to Mahayana.[5]

The Pāli Canon is the most complete Buddhist canon surviving in a classical Indian language, Pāli, which serves as the school's sacred language[2] and lingua franca.[6] In contrast to Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, Theravāda tends to be conservative in matters of doctrine (*pariyatti*) and monastic discipline (*vinaya*).[7] One element of this conservatism is the fact that Theravāda rejects the authenticity of the Mahayana sutras (which appeared c. 1st century BCE onwards).[8][9] Consequently, Theravāda generally does not recognize the existence of many Buddhas and bodhisattvas believed by the Mahāyāna school, such as Amitābha and Vairocana, because they are not found in their scriptures.[10]

Theravāda derives from Indian Sthavira nikāya (an early Buddhist school). This tradition developed significantly in India and Sri Lanka from the 3rd century BCE onward, particularly with the writing down of the Pāli Canon and the growth of its commentarial literature.[11][12][13] From both India, as its historical origin, and Sri Lanka, as its principal center of development, the Theravāda tradition subsequently spread to Southeast Asia, where it became the dominant form of Buddhism.[14] Theravāda is the official religion of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Cambodia, and the main dominant Buddhist variant found in Laos and Thailand. It is practiced by minorities in India, Bangladesh, China, Nepal, North Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Taiwan. The diaspora of all of these groups, as well as converts around the world, also embrace and practice Theravāda Buddhism.

During the modern era, new developments have included Buddhist modernism, the Vipassana movement which reinvigorated Theravāda meditation practice,[web 1] the growth of the Thai Forest Tradition which reemphasized forest monasticism and the spread of Theravāda westward to places such as India and Nepal, along with Buddhist immigrants and converts in the European Union and in the United States.

History

Main article: History of Theravāda Buddhism

Pre-modern

The Thuparamaya Stupa, the earliest stupa after Theravada Buddhism became the official religion in Sri Lanka, dating back to the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa (247–207 BCE)

The Ruwanwelisaya stupa, built by the Sri Lankan King Dutugemunu (c. 140 BCE)
The Theravāda school descends from the Vibhajjavāda, a division within the Sthāvira

nikāya, one of the two major orders that arose after the first schism in the Indian Buddhist community.[15][16] Theravāda sources trace their tradition to the Third Buddhist council when elder Moggaliputta-Tissa is said to have compiled the Kathavatthu, an important work which lays out the Vibhajjavāda doctrinal position.[17]

Aided by the patronage of Mauryan kings like Ashoka, this school spread throughout India and reached Sri Lanka through the efforts of missionary monks like Mahinda. In Sri Lanka, it became known as the Tambapaṇṇiya (and later as Mahāvihāravāsins) which was based at the Great Vihara (Mahavihara) in Anuradhapura (the ancient Sri Lankan capital).[18] According to Theravāda sources, another one of the Ashokan missions was also sent to Suvaṇṇabhūmi ("The Golden Land"), which may refer to Southeast Asia.[19]

By the first century BCE, Theravāda Buddhism was well established in the main settlements of the Kingdom of Anuradhapura.[20] The Pali Canon, which contains the main scriptures of the Theravāda, was committed to writing in the first century BCE.[21] Throughout the history of ancient and medieval Sri Lanka, Theravāda was the main religion of the Sinhalese people and its temples and monasteries were patronized by the Sri Lankan kings, who saw themselves as the protectors of the religion.[22]

Gold Plates containing fragments of the Pali Tipitaka (5th century) found in Maunggan (a village near the city of Sriksetra)

Bagan, the capital of the Bagan Kingdom. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, more than 10,000 temples, pagodas and monasteries were constructed in the Bagan plains. [23]

Over time, two other sects split off from the Mahāvihāra tradition, the Abhayagiri and Jetavana.[24] While the Abhayagiri sect became known for the syncretic study of Mahayana and Vajrayana texts, as well as the Theravāda canon, the Mahāvihāra tradition did not accept these new scriptures.[25] Instead, Mahāvihāra scholars like Buddhaghosa focused on the exegesis of the Pali scriptures and on the Abhidhamma. These Theravāda sub-sects often came into conflict with each other over royal patronage.[26] The reign of Parākrāmabāhu I (1153–1186) saw an extensive reform of the Sri Lankan sangha after years of warfare on the island. Parākrāmabāhu created a single unified sangha which came to be dominated by the Mahāvihāra sect.[27][28]

Epigraphical evidence has established that Theravāda Buddhism became a dominant religion in the Southeast Asian kingdoms of Sri Ksetra and Dvaravati from about the 5th century CE onwards.[29] The oldest surviving Buddhist texts in the Pāli language are gold plates found at Sri Ksetra dated circa the 5th to 6th century.[30] Before the Theravāda tradition became the dominant religion in Southeast Asia, Mahāyāna, Vajrayana and Hinduism were also prominent.[31][32]

Starting at around the 11th century, Sinhalese Theravāda monks and Southeast Asian

elites led a widespread conversion of most of mainland Southeast Asia to the Theravādin Mahavihara school.[33] The patronage of monarchs such as the Burmese king Anawrahta (Pali: Aniruddha, 1044–1077) and the Thai king Ram Khamhaeng (floruit. late 13th century) was instrumental in the rise of Theravāda Buddhism as the predominant religion of Burma and Thailand.[34][35][36]

Burmese and Thai kings saw themselves as Dhamma Kings and as protectors of the Theravāda faith. They promoted the building of new temples, patronized scholarship, monastic ordinations and missionary works as well as attempted to eliminate certain non-Buddhist practices like animal sacrifices.[37][38][39] During the 15th and 16th centuries, Theravāda also became established as the state religion in Cambodia and Laos. In Cambodia, numerous Hindu and Mahāyāna temples, most famously Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, were transformed into Theravādin monasteries.[40][41]

Modern history

A Burmese man meditates in Myanmar. The widespread practice of meditation by laypersons is a modern development in Theravāda.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Theravāda Buddhists came into direct contact with western ideologies, religions and modern science. The various responses to this encounter have been called "Buddhist modernism".[42] In the British colonies of Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) and Burma (Myanmar), Buddhist institutions lost their traditional role as the prime providers of education (a role that was often filled by Christian schools).[43] In response to this, Buddhist organizations were founded which sought to preserve Buddhist scholarship and provide a Buddhist education.[44] Anagarika Dhammapala, Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera, Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera and Henry Steel Olcott (one of the first American western converts to Buddhism) were some of the main figures of the Sri Lankan Buddhist revival.[45] Two new monastic orders were formed in the 19th century, the Amarapura Nikāya and the Rāmañña Nikāya.[46]

In Burma, an influential modernist figure was king Mindon Min (1808–1878), known for his patronage of the Fifth Buddhist council (1871) and the Tripiṭaka tablets at Kuthodaw Pagoda (still the world's largest book) with the intention of preserving the Buddha Dhamma. Burma also saw the growth of the "Vipassana movement", which focused on reviving Buddhist meditation and doctrinal learning. Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) was one of the key figures in this movement.[47] After independence, Myanmar held the Sixth Buddhist council (Vesak 1954 to Vesak 1956) to create a new redaction of the Pāli Canon, which was then published by the government in 40 volumes. The Vipassana movement continued to grow after independence, becoming an international movement with centers around the world. Influential meditation teachers of the post-independence era include U Narada, Mahasi Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Pandita, Nyanaponika Thera, Webu Sayadaw, U Ba Khin and his student S.N. Goenka.

Meanwhile, in Thailand (the only Theravāda nation to retain its independence throughout the colonial era), the religion became much more centralized, bureaucratized

and controlled by the state after a series of reforms promoted by Thai kings of the Chakri dynasty. King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868) and his successor Chulalongkorn (1868–1910) were especially involved in centralizing sangha reforms. Under these kings, the sangha was organized into a hierarchical bureaucracy led by the Sangha Council of Elders (Pali: Mahāthera Samāgama), the highest body of the Thai sangha.[48] Mongkut also led the creation of a new monastic order, the Dhammayuttika Nikaya, which kept a stricter monastic discipline than the rest of the Thai sangha (this included not using money, not storing up food and not taking milk in the evening).[49][50] The Dhammayuttika movement was characterized by an emphasis on the original Pali Canon and a rejection of Thai folk beliefs which were seen as irrational.[51] Under the leadership of Prince Wachirayan Warorot, a new education and examination system was introduced for Thai monks.[52]

Thai Forest teacher Ajahn Chah with Ajahn Sumedho (front right), Ajahn Pasanno (rear and left of Sumedho) and other monastics (1980)

The 20th century also saw the growth of "forest traditions" which focused on forest living and strict monastic discipline. The main forest movements of this era are the Sri Lankan Forest Tradition and the Thai Forest Tradition, founded by Ajahn Mun (1870–1949) and his students.[53]

Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia and Laos went through similar experiences in the modern era. Both had to endure French colonialism, destructive civil wars and oppressive communist governments. Under French Rule, French indologists of the École française d'Extrême-Orient became involved in the reform of Buddhism, setting up institutions for the training of Cambodian and Lao monks, such as the Ecole de Pali which was founded in Phnom Penh in 1914.[54] While the Khmer Rouge effectively destroyed Cambodia's Buddhist institutions, after the end of the communist regime the Cambodian Sangha was re-established by monks who had returned from exile.[55] In contrast, communist rule in Laos was less destructive since the Pathet Lao sought to make use of the sangha for political ends by imposing direct state control.[56] During the late 1980s and 1990s, the official attitudes toward Buddhism began to liberalise in Laos and there was a resurgence of traditional Buddhist activities such as merit-making and doctrinal study.

Global Vipassana Pagoda, Maharashtra, India. S.N. Goenka laid the foundation for the structure in 2000 and the pagoda opened in 2009. Regular meditation courses are held at the complex.

The modern era also saw the spread of Theravāda Buddhism around the world and the revival of the religion in places where it remains a minority faith. Some of the major events of the spread of modern Theravāda include:

The 20th-century Nepalese Theravāda movement which introduced Theravāda Buddhism to Nepal and was led by prominent figures such as Dharmaditya

Dharmacharya, Mahapragya, Pragyananda and Dhammalok Mahasthvir.[57]

The establishment of some of the first Theravāda Viharas in the Western world, such as the London Buddhist Vihara (1926), Das Buddhistische Haus in Berlin (1957) and the Washington Buddhist Vihara in Washington, DC (1965).

The founding of the Bengal Buddhist Association (1892) and the Dharmankur Vihar (1900) in Calcutta by the Bengali monk Kripasaran Mahasthvir, which were key events in the Bengali Theravāda revival.[58]

The founding of the Maha Bodhi Society in 1891 by Anagarika Dharmapala which focused on the conservation and restoration of important Indian Buddhist sites, such as Bodhi Gaya and Sarnath.[59][60]

The introduction of Theravāda to other Southeast Asian nations like Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Especially with Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda missionary efforts among English-speaking Chinese communities. In addition, the establishment of the Indonesian Theravāda Saṅgha in 1976 and the Theravāda Buddhist Council of Malaysia in 2012 also signaled the revival of Theravāda in both countries.[61][62]

The return of Western Theravādin monks trained in the Thai Forest Tradition to western countries and the subsequent founding of monasteries led by western monastics, such as Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, Metta Forest Monastery, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery, Bodhinyana Monastery and Santacittarama.

The spread of the Vipassana movement around the world by the efforts of people like Mother Sayamagyi, S.N. Goenka, Anagarika Munindra, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Dipa Ma, and Ruth Denison.

The Vietnamese Theravāda movement, led by figures such as Ven. Hộ-Tông (Vansarakkhita).[63]

Texts

Pāli Tipiṭaka

Main article: Pali Canon

Pāli Canon

Theravāda Buddhism

1. Vinaya Piṭaka

2. Sutta Piṭaka

3. Abhidhamma Piṭaka

AṭṭhakathāTīkāAnuṭīkāPakaraṇavisēsaAṭṭhayaṃjaPāli literatureParitta

vte

Pre-modern copies of the Tipiṭaka were preserved in palm-leaf manuscripts, most of which have not survived the humid climate of South Asia and Southeast Asia.

A full modern set of the Tipiṭaka can fill many volumes (from 40 to over 50 volumes depending on the edition).

According to Kate Crosby, for Theravāda, the Pāli Tipiṭaka, also known as the Pāli Canon is "the highest authority on what constitutes the Dhamma (the truth or teaching of the Buddha) and the organization of the Sangha (the community of monks and

nuns)."[64]

The language of the Tipiṭaka, Pāli, is a middle-Indic language which is the main religious and scholarly language in Theravāda. This language may have evolved out of various Indian dialects, and is related to, but not the same as, the ancient language of Magadha.[65]

An early form of the Tipiṭaka may have been transmitted to Sri Lanka during the reign of Ashoka, which saw a period of Buddhist missionary activity. After being orally transmitted (as was the custom for religious texts in those days) for some centuries, the texts were finally committed to writing in the 1st century BCE. Theravāda is one of the first Buddhist schools to commit its Tipiṭaka to writing.[66] The recension of the Tipiṭaka which survives today is that of the Sri Lankan Mahavihara sect.[67]

The oldest manuscripts of the Tipiṭaka from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia date to the 15th Century, and they are incomplete.[68] Complete manuscripts of the four Nikayas are only available from the 17th Century onwards.[69] However, fragments of the Tipiṭaka have been found in inscriptions from Southeast Asia, the earliest of which have been dated to the 3rd or 4th century.[68][70] According to Alexander Wynne, "they agree almost exactly with extant Pāli manuscripts. This means that the Pāli Tipiṭaka has been transmitted with a high degree of accuracy for well over 1,500 years."[70]

There are numerous editions of the Tipiṭaka, some of the major modern editions include the Pali Text Society edition (published in Roman script), the Burmese Sixth Council edition (in Burmese script, 1954–56) and the Thai Tipiṭaka edited and published in Thai script after the council held during the reign of Rama VII (1925–35). There is also a Khmer edition, published in Phnom Penh (1931–69).[71][72][73]

The structure of the books considered canonical within the Pali Tripitaka. The Theravāda school generally only recognizes the Pali Tripitaka and rejects the authenticity of other Tripitaka versions.

The Pāli Tipitaka consists of three parts: the Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka. Of these, the Abhidhamma Pitaka is believed to be a later addition to the collection, its composition dating from around the 3rd century BCE onwards.[74] The Pāli Abhidhamma was not recognized outside the Theravāda school. There are also some texts which were late additions that are included in the fifth Nikaya, the Khuddaka Nikāya ('Minor Collection'), such as the Paṭisambhidāmagga (possibly c. 3rd to 1st century BCE) and the Buddhavaṃsa (c. 1st and 2nd century BCE).[75][76]

The main parts of the Sutta Pitaka and some portions of the Vinaya show considerable overlap in content with the Agamas, the parallel collections used by non-Theravāda schools in India which are preserved in Chinese and partially in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Tibetan, as well as the various non-Theravāda Vinayas. On this basis, these Early Buddhist texts (i.e. the Nikayas and parts of the Vinaya) are generally believed to be

some of the oldest and most authoritative sources on the doctrines of pre-sectarian Buddhism by modern scholars.[77][78]

Much of the material in the earlier portions is not specifically "Theravādan", but the collection of teachings that this school's adherents preserved from the early, non-sectarian body of teachings. According to Peter Harvey, while the Theravādans may have added texts to their Tipiṭaka (such as the Abhidhamma texts and so on), they generally did not tamper with the earlier material.[79]

The historically later parts of the canon, mainly the Abhidhamma and some parts of the Vinaya, contain some distinctive elements and teachings which are unique to the Theravāda school and often differ from the Abhidhammas or Vinayas of other early Buddhist schools.[80] For example, while the Theravāda Vinaya contains a total of 227 monastic rules for bhikkhus, the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya (used in East Asian Buddhism) has a total of 253 rules for bhikkhus (though the overall structure is the same).[81] These differences arose from the systematization and historical development of doctrines and monasticism in the centuries after the death of the Buddha.[82]

The Abhidhamma-piṭaka contains "a restatement of the doctrine of the Buddha in strictly formalized language." Its texts present a new method, the Abhidhamma method, which attempts to build a single consistent philosophical system (in contrast with the suttas, which present numerous teachings given by the Buddha to particular individuals according to their needs).[83] Because the Abhidhamma focuses on analyzing the internal lived experience of beings and the intentional structure of consciousness, it has often been compared to a kind of phenomenological psychology by numerous modern scholars such as Nyanaponika, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Alexander Piatigorsky.[84]

The Theravāda school has traditionally held the doctrinal position that the canonical Abhidhamma Piṭaka was actually taught by the Buddha himself.[85] Modern scholarship in contrast, has generally held that the Abhidhamma texts date from the 3rd century BCE onwards.[86] However some scholars, such as Frauwallner, also hold that the early Abhidhamma texts developed out of exegetical and catechetical work which made use of doctrinal lists which can be seen in the suttas, called matikas.[87][88]

Non-canonical literature

Main article: Pali literature

There are numerous Theravāda works which are important for the tradition even though they are not part of the Tipiṭaka. Perhaps the most important texts apart from the Tipiṭaka are the works of the influential scholar Buddhaghosa (4th–5th century CE), known for his Pāli commentaries (which were based on older Sri Lankan commentaries of the Mahavihara tradition). He is also the author of a very important compendium of Theravāda doctrine, the Visuddhimagga.[89] Other figures like Dhammapala and Buddhadatta also wrote Theravāda commentaries and other works in Pali during the time of Buddhaghosa.[90] While these texts do not have the same scriptural authority in Theravāda as the Tipiṭaka, they remain influential works for the exegesis of the Tipiṭaka.

An important genre of Theravādin literature is shorter handbooks and summaries, which serve as introductions and study guides for the larger commentaries. Two of the more influential summaries are Sariputta Thera's Pālimuttakavinayavinicchayaṅgaha, a summary of Buddhaghosa's Vinaya commentary and Anuruddha's Abhidhammatṭhasaṅgaha (a "Manual of Abhidhamma").[91]

Throughout the history of Theravāda, Theravāda monks also produced other works of Pāli literature such as historical chronicles (like the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa), hagiographies, poetry, Pāli grammars, and "sub-commentaries" (that is, commentaries on the commentaries).

While Pāli texts are symbolically and ritually important for many Theravādins, most people are likely to access Buddhist teachings through vernacular literature, oral teachings, sermons, art and performance as well as films and Internet media.[92] According to Kate Crosby, "there is a far greater volume of Theravāda literature in vernacular languages than in Pāli." [93]

An important genre of Theravādin literature, in both Pāli and vernacular languages, are the Jataka tales, stories of the Buddha's past lives. They are very popular among all classes and are rendered in a wide variety of media formats, from cartoons to high literature. The Vessantara Jātaka is one of the most popular of these.[94]

Other Buddhist texts

Most Theravāda Buddhists generally consider Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures to be apocryphal, meaning that they are not authentic words of the Buddha.[95]

Consequently, Theravādin generally does not recognize the existence of many Buddhas and bodhisattvas believed by the Mahāyāna school, such as Amitābha and Vairocana, because they are not found in the canonical scriptures.[10]

Doctrine (pariyatti)

Painting of the Buddha's first sermon from Wat Chedi Liem in Thailand

Core teachings

The core of Theravāda Buddhist doctrine is contained in the Pāli Canon, the only complete collection of early Buddhist Texts surviving in a classical Indic language.[96]

The fundamentals of Theravadin Buddhism are shared by the other early Buddhist schools and Mahayana traditions. They include central concepts such as:[97]

A doctrine of action (karma)—which is based on intention (cetanā)—and a related doctrine of rebirth, which holds that after death, sentient (albeit incompletely awakened) beings will transmigrate to another body, possibly in another realm. The type of realm a being is reborn in is determined by the being's past karma, defining a fundamental reality driven by a cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra).

A rejection of other doctrines and practices found in Brahmanical religions like

Hinduism, including the notion that the Vedas are a divine authority. Any form of sacrifices to the gods (including animal sacrifices) and ritual purification by bathing are considered useless and spiritually corrupted.[98] The Pāli texts also reject the idea that castes are divinely ordained.

A set of major teachings called the bodhipakkhiyādharmā (factors conducive to awakening).

Descriptions of various meditative practices or states, namely the four jhanas (meditative absorptions) and the formless dimensions (arupāyatana).

Ethical training (sila), including the ten courses of wholesome action and the five precepts.

Nirvana (Pali: nibbana), the highest good and final state in Theravāda Buddhism. It is the complete and final end of suffering, a state of perfection. It is also the end of all rebirth, but it is not an annihilation (uccheda).[99]

The corruptions or influxes (asavas), such as the corruption of sensual pleasures (kāmasava), existence corruption (bhavāsava), and ignorance corruption (avijjāsava).

The doctrine of impermanence (anicca), which holds that all physical and mental phenomena are transient, unstable, and inconstant.[100]

The doctrine of not-self (Anattā), which holds that all the constituents of a person, namely, the five aggregates (physical form, feelings, perceptions, intentions and consciousness), are empty of a self (atta), since they are impermanent and not always under our control. Therefore, there is no unchanging substance, permanent self, soul, or essence.[101][102]

The five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇāni), which are obstacles to meditation: (1) sense-desire, (2) hostility, (3) sloth and torpor, (4) restlessness and worry, and (5) doubt.

The Four Divine Abodes (brahmavihārā), also known as the four immeasurables (appamaññā).

The Four Noble Truths, which state, in brief: (1) there is dukkha (suffering, unease); (2) there is a cause of dukkha, mainly craving (taṇhā); (3) the removal of craving leads to the end (nirodha) of suffering; and (4) there is a path (magga) to follow to bring this about.[103]

The framework of dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda), which explains how suffering arises (beginning with ignorance and ending in birth, old age, and death) and how suffering can be brought to an end.[104]

The Middle Way, which is seen as having two major facets. First, it is a middle path between extreme asceticism and sensual indulgence. It is also seen as a middle view between the idea that at death beings are annihilated and that there is an eternal self (Pali: atta).

The Noble Eightfold Path, one of the main outlines of the Buddhist paths to liberation. The eight factors are: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Samadhi.

The practice of taking refuge in the Triple Gems: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha.

The Seven Factors of Awakening (satta bojjhaṅgā): mindfulness (sati), investigation (dhamma vicaya), energy (viriya), bliss (pīti), relaxation (passaddhi), samādhi, and equanimity (upekkha).

The six sense bases (saḷāyatana) and a corresponding theory of sense impression (phassa) and consciousness (viññāna).[105]

Various frameworks for the practice of mindfulness (sati)—mainly, the four satipatthanas (establishments of mindfulness) and the 16 elements of anapanasati (mindfulness of breathing).

Main doctrinal differences with other Buddhist traditions

A statue of the arahant Moggallāna, who is identifiable by his dark (nila, i.e. blue/black) skin. He was one of the two most senior disciples of the Buddha and regarded as[according to whom?] the foremost in psychic powers.

The orthodox standpoints of Theravāda in comparison to other Buddhist denominations are presented in the Kathavatthu (Points of Controversy), as well as in other works by commentators like Buddhaghosa.

Traditionally, Theravāda maintains the following key doctrinal positions, though not all Theravādins agree with the traditional points of view:[106][107]

On the philosophy of time, the Theravāda tradition follows philosophical presentism—the view that only present moment phenomena (dhamma) exist—rather than the eternalist view of the Sarvāstivādin tradition, which held that dhammas exist in all three times—past, present, and future.

The arahant is never a layperson, for they have abandoned the fetters of a layperson, including married life, using money, etc.

The power (bala) of a Buddha is unique and not common to the disciples (śāvaka) or arahants.

Theravāda Abhidhamma holds that a single thought (citta) cannot last as long as a day.

Theravāda Abhidhamma holds that insight into the Four Noble Truths happens instantaneously (khaṇa), rather than gradually (anupubba), as was held by Sarvastivada. The defilements (kilesa) are also abandoned instantaneously, not gradually.[citation needed]

Theravāda Abhidhamma traditionally rejects the view that there is an intermediate or transitional state (antarabhāva) between rebirths, instead holding that rebirth happens instantaneously.[108] However, as has been noted by various modern scholars (e.g., Bhikkhu Sujato), there are canonical passages that support the idea of an intermediate state (such as the Kutuhalasāla Sutta).[109] Some Theravāda scholars (such as Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Thero) have defended the idea of an intermediate state. It is also a widespread belief some monks and laypersons in the Theravāda world (where it is commonly referred to as the gandhabba or antarabhāva).[110]

Theravāda does not accept the Mahayana notion that there are two forms of nibbana—an inferior "localized" or "abiding" (pratiṣṭhita) nirvana and a non-abiding (apraṭiṣṭhita) nirvana. Such a dual nirvana theory is absent in the suttas.[111] According to the Kathāvatthu, there can be no dividing line separating the unconditioned element, and there is no superiority or inferiority in the unity of nibbana.[112]

Theravāda exegetical works consider nibbana to be a real existent instead of a conceptual or nominal existent (prajñapti), referring to the mere destruction

(khayamatta) of the defilements or non-existence of the five aggregates, as was held by some in the Sautrāntika school, for example.[113] In Theravāda scholasticism, nibbana is defined as the cessation (nirodha) of non-arising and exists separately from the mere destruction of passion, hatred, and delusion.[114]

In Theravāda exegetical works, mental phenomena last briefly or instantly (khaṇa), but physical phenomena do not.

Theravāda holds that the Buddha resided in the human realm (manussa-loka). It rejects the docetic view found in Mahayana that the Buddha's physical body was an incorporeal manifestation, emanation, or magical creation (nirmāṇa) of a transcendental being, and thus, that his birth and death were an illusion.[115] Also, the Theravāda school rejects the view that there are currently numerous Buddhas in all directions.

Theravāda holds that there is a ground level of consciousness called the bhavaṅga, which conditions the rebirth consciousness.

Theravāda rejects the Pudgalavada doctrine of the pudgala ("person" or "personal entity") as being more than a conceptual designation imputed on the five aggregates. [116][117]

Theravāda rejects the view of the Lokottaravāda schools that all acts done by the Buddha (including all speech, defecation, and urination, etc.) were supramundane or transcendental (lokuttara).[118] In Theravāda, a Buddha does not have the power to stop something that has already arisen from ceasing; they cannot stop a being from getting old, sick, or dying, and they cannot create a permanent thing (like a flower that does not die).

Theravāda traditionally defends the idea that the Buddha himself taught the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.[119] This is now being questioned by some modern Theravādins in light of modern Buddhist studies scholarship.

In Theravāda, nibbana is the only unconstructed phenomenon (asankhata-dhamma, asankhatadhatu). Unlike in the Sarvastivada school, space (ākāsa), is seen as a constructed dhamma in Theravāda. Even the four noble truths are not unconstructed phenomena, nor is the domain of cessation (nirodhasamāpatti). "Thatness" (tathatā) is also a constructed phenomenon. According to the Dhammasaṅgani, nibbana, the unconstructed element, is 'without condition' (appaccaya) and is different from the five aggregates which are 'with condition' (sappaccaya).[120]

In Theravāda, the bodhisatta path is suitable only for a few exceptional people (like Sakyaṃuni and Metteya).[121] Theravāda also defines a bodhisatta as someone who has made a vow in front of a living Buddha.[122]

In Theravāda, a physical sensory organ (indriya) conditions the mental consciousness (manovinnāṇa) and is the material support for consciousness. Some later Theravāda works like the Visuddhimagga locate this physical basis for consciousness at the heart (hadaya-vatthu), the Pali Canon itself is silent on this issue.[123][124] Some modern Theravāda scholars propose alternative notions. For example, Suwanda H. J.

Sugunasiri proposes that the basis for consciousness is the entire physical organism, which he ties with the canonical concept of jīvitindriya or life faculty.[123] W. F.

Jayasuriya meanwhile, argues that "hadaya" is not meant literally (it can also mean "essence", "core"), but refers to the entire nervous system (including the brain), which is dependent on the heart and blood.[124]

Theravādins generally reject the Mahayana sutras as Buddhavaṇṇa (word of the Buddha), and do not study or see these texts (or Mahayana doctrines) as reliable sources. They reject the view that the Tipitaka is incomplete or inferior (i.e., "Hinayana") and that Mahayana texts are somehow more advanced.[125]

Theravādins traditionally believe that an awakened arahant has an "incorruptible nature" and is thus morally perfect.[126] They have no ignorance or doubts. According to Theravāda doctrine, arahants (and the other three lesser ariyas: stream enterers, etc.) cannot fall back or regress from their state.[127]

Abhidhamma philosophy

Main article: Theravāda Abhidhamma

Part of Theravāda Abhidhamma

52 Cetasikas

Theravāda Buddhism

7 universal (sabbacittasādhāraṇa)

6 occasional (pakiṇṇaka)

14 unwholesome (akusala)

25 beautiful (sobhana)

icon Buddhism portal

vte

Ledi Sayadaw was one of the great Abhidhamma scholars of the 20th century as well as a teacher of meditation.

Theravāda scholastics developed a systematic exposition of the Buddhist doctrine called the Abhidhamma. In the Pāli Nikayas, the Buddha teaches through an analytical method in which experience is explained using various conceptual groupings of physical and mental processes called "dhammas". Examples of lists of dhammas taught by the Buddha include the twelve sense 'spheres' or āyatanas, the five aggregates or khandha, and the eighteen elements of cognition or dhatus.[128]

Theravāda traditionally promotes itself as the Vibhajjavāda "teaching of analysis" and as the heirs to the Buddha's analytical method. Expanding this model, Theravāda Abhidhamma scholasticism concerned itself with analyzing "ultimate truth" (paramattha-sacca), which it sees as being composed of all possible dhammas and their relationships. The central theory of the Abhidhamma is thus known as the "dhamma theory".[129][130] "Dhamma" has been translated as "factors" (Collett Cox), "psychic characteristics" (Bronkhorst), "psycho-physical events" (Noa Ronkin), and "phenomena" (Nyanaponika Thera).[131][6]

According to the Sri Lankan scholar Y. Karunadasa, a dhammas ("principles" or "elements") are "those items that result when the process of analysis is taken to its ultimate limits".[129] However, this does not mean that they have an independent existence, for it is "only for the purposes of description" that they are postulated.[132] Noa Ronkin defines dhammas as "the constituents of sentient experience; the irreducible 'building blocks' that make up one's world, albeit they are not static mental

contents and certainly not substances." [133] Thus, while in Theravāda Abhidhamma, dhammas are the ultimate constituents of experience, they are not seen as substances, essences or independent particulars, since they are empty (suñña) of a self (attā) and conditioned. [134] This is spelled out in the Patisambhidhamagga, which states that dhammas are empty of svabhava (sabhavena suññaṃ). [135]

According to Ronkin, the canonical Pāli Abhidhamma remains pragmatic and psychological, and "does not take much interest in ontology" in contrast with the Sarvastivada tradition. Paul Williams also notes that the Abhidhamma remains focused on the practicalities of insight meditation and leaves ontology "relatively unexplored". [136] Ronkin does note, however, that later Theravāda sub-commentaries (ṭīkā) do show a doctrinal shift towards ontological realism from the earlier epistemic and practical concerns. [137]

On the other hand, Y. Karunadasa contends that the tradition of realism goes back to the earliest discourses, as opposed to developing only in later Theravada sub-commentaries:

If we base ourselves on the Pali Nikayas, then we should be compelled to conclude that Buddhism is realistic. There is no explicit denial anywhere of the external world. Nor is there any positive evidence to show that the world is mind-made or simply a projection of subjective thoughts. That Buddhism recognizes the extra-mental existence of matter and, the external world is clearly suggested by the texts. Throughout the discourses it is the language of realism that one encounters. The whole Buddhist practical doctrine and discipline, which has the attainment of Nibbana as its final goal, is based on the recognition of the material world and the conscious living beings living therein. [138]

The Theravāda Abhidhamma holds that there is a total of 82 possible types of dhammas, 81 of which are conditioned (sankhata), while one is unconditioned, which is nibbana. The 81 conditioned dhammas are divided into three broad categories: consciousness (citta), associated mentality (cetasika) and materiality, or physical phenomena (rupa). [139] Since no dhamma exists independently, every single dhamma of consciousness, known as a citta, arises associated (sampayutta) with at least seven mental factors (cetasikas). [140] In Abhidhamma, all awareness events are thus seen as being characterized by intentionality and never exist in isolation. [139] Much of Abhidhamma philosophy deals with categorizing the different consciousnesses and their accompanying mental factors as well as their conditioned relationships (paccaya). [140]

Cosmology

Sakka in Tavatimsa Heaven, Wat Yang Thong, Songkhla, Thailand

A Burmese depiction of a hell scene

Main article: Buddhist cosmology of the Theravada school

The Pāli Tipiṭaka outlines a hierarchical cosmological system with various planes of

existence (bhava) into which sentient beings may be reborn depending on their past actions. Good actions lead one to the higher realms, and bad actions lead to the lower realms.[141][142] However, even for the gods (devas) in the higher realms like Indra, there is still death, loss and suffering.[143]

The main categories of the planes of existence are:[141][142]

Arūpa-bhava, the formless or incorporeal plane. These are associated with the four formless meditations: infinite space, infinite consciousness, infinite nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception. Beings in these realms live extremely long lives (thousands of kappas).

Kāma-bhava, the spiritual plane of desires. This includes numerous realms of existence such as: various hells (niraya) which are devoid of happiness, the realms of animals, the hungry ghosts (peta), the realm of humans, and various heaven realms where the devas live (such as Tavatimsa and Tusita).

Rūpa-bhava, the plane of form. The realms in this plane are associated with the four meditative absorptions (jhanas), and those who attain these meditations are reborn in these divine realms.

These various planes of existence can be found in countless world systems (loka-dhatu), which are born, expand, contract, and are destroyed in a cyclical nature across vast expanses of time (measures in kappas). This cosmology is similar to other ancient Indian systems, such as the Jain cosmology.[142] This entire cyclical multiverse of constant birth and death is called samsara. Outside of this system of samsara is nibbana (lit. 'vanishing, quenching, blowing out'), a deathless (amata) and transcendent reality, which is a total and final release (vimutti) from all suffering (dukkha) and rebirth. [144]

Soteriology and Buddhology

According to Theravāda doctrine, release from suffering (i.e. nibbana) is attained in four stages of awakening (bodhi):[web 2][web 3]

Stream-Enterers: Those who have destroyed the first three fetters (the false view of self, doubt/indecision, and clinging to ethics and vows);[web 4][web 5]

Once-Returners: Those who have destroyed the first three fetters and have weakened the fetters of desire and ill-will;

Non-Returners: Those who have destroyed the five lower fetters, which bind beings to the world of the senses;[145]

Arahants (lit. "honorable" or "worthies"): Those who have realized Nibbana and are free from all defilements. They have abandoned all ignorance, craving for existence, restlessness (uddhacca) and subtle pride (māna).[145]

In Theravāda Buddhism, a Buddha is a sentient being who has discovered the path out of samsara by themselves, has reached Nibbana, and then makes the path available to others by teaching (known as "turning the wheel of the Dhamma"). A Buddha is also believed to have extraordinary powers and abilities (abhiññā), such as the ability to read minds and fly through the air.[146]

The Theravāda canon depicts Gautama Buddha as the most recent Buddha in a line of previous Buddhas stretching back for aeons. They also mention the future Buddha, named Metteyya.[147] Traditionally, the Theravāda school also rejects the idea that there can be numerous Buddhas active in the world simultaneously.[148]

A Burmese illustrated manuscript depicting Sumedha (the future Buddha Gautama) and Dīpankara Buddha

Regarding how a sentient being becomes a Buddha, the Theravāda school also presents this path. Indeed, according to Buddhaghosa, there are three main soteriological paths: the path of the Buddhas (buddhayāna); the way of the individual Buddhas (paccekabuddhayāna); and the way of the disciples (sāvakayāna).[149]

However, unlike in Mahayana Buddhism, the Theravāda holds that the Buddha path is not for everyone and that beings on the Buddha path (bodhisattas) are quite rare.[150] While in Mahayana, bodhisattas refers to beings who have developed the wish to become Buddhas, Theravāda (like other early Buddhist schools), defines a bodhisatta as someone who has resolved (abhinīhāra) to become a Buddha in front of a living Buddha, and has also received a confirmation from that Buddha that they will reach Buddhahood.[151] Cariyāpiṭaka is a Theravāda text which focuses on the path of the Buddhas, while the Nidānakathā and the Buddhavaṃsa are also Theravāda texts which discuss the Buddha's path.[151]

Modern developments

The modern era saw new developments in Theravāda scholarship due to the influence of Western thought. As Donald K. Swearer writes:

Although monastic education is still grounded in the study of Buddhist texts, doctrine, and the Pali language, the curricula of monastic colleges and universities also reflect subject matter and disciplines associated with Western education.[152]

Buddhist modernist trends can be traced to figures like Anagarika Dhammapala, King Mongkut, and the first prime minister of Burma U Nu.[153] They promoted a form of Buddhism that was compatible with rationalism and science, and opposed to superstition and certain folk practices. Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* is seen by scholars as an introduction to modernist Buddhist thought, and the book continues to be widely used in universities.[152]

Another modern phenomenon is Buddhist philosophers who received an education in the West, such as K. N. Jayatilleke (a student of Wittgenstein at Cambridge) and Hammalawa Saddhatissa (who received his Phd at Edinburgh), going on to write modern works on Buddhist philosophy (*Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963 and *Buddhist Ethics*, 1987 respectively). Henepola Gunaratana is another modern Theravāda scholar who studied philosophy in the West (at the American University).

The modern encounter with Christian missionaries also led to new debates (such as the Panadura debate) and doctrinal works written in defense of Buddhism or attacking Christian ideas, such as Gunapala Dharmasiri's *A Buddhist critique of the Christian concept of God* (1988).

There have also been several modern Theravāda scholars who have taken a historical-critical perspective on Theravāda literature and doctrine, attempting to understand its historical development. Some of these figures, such as David Kalupahana, Buddhadasa, and Bhikkhu Sujato, have criticized traditional Theravāda commentators like Buddhaghosa for their doctrinal innovations which differ in significant ways from the early Buddhist texts.[154][155][156]

The modern era also saw new Buddhist works on topics which pre-modern Buddhists avoided, such as socially engaged Buddhism and Buddhist economics. Thinkers such as Buddhadasa, Sulak Sivaraksa, Prayudh Payutto, Neville Karunatilake, and Padmasiri de Silva have written on these topics. Modern scholarship in Western languages by Western Buddhist monks such as Nyanatiloka, Nyanaponika, Nyanamoli, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Analayo is another recent development in the Theravāda world.

Practice (paṭipatti)

The Dhamma Wheel with eight spokes usually symbolizes the Noble Eightfold Path.

Textual basis

In the Pāli Canon, the path (magga) or way (paṭipada) of Buddhist practice is described in various ways, one of the most widely used frameworks in Theravāda is the Noble Eightfold Path:

The Blessed One said, "Now what, monks, is the Noble Eightfold Path? Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration." [web 6]

The Noble Eightfold Path can also be summarized as the Three Noble Disciplines of sīla (moral conduct or discipline), Samādhi (meditation or concentration) and Paññā (understanding or wisdom). [web 7][157][web 8]

Theravāda orthodoxy takes the seven stages of purification as outlined in the Visuddhimagga as the basic outline of the path to be followed. The Visuddhimagga, a Sinhala Theravāda doctrinal summa written in the fifth century by Buddhaghosa, became the orthodox account of the Theravāda path to liberation in Sri Lanka after the 12th century and this influence spread to other Theravāda nations.[89] It gives the sequence of seven purifications, in three sections:

The first section (part 1) explains the rules of discipline, and the method for finding a correct temple to practice, or how to meet a good teacher.

The second section (part 2) describes Samatha (calming) practice, object by object (see

Kammaṭṭhāna for the list of the forty traditional objects). It mentions different stages of Samādhī.

The third section (parts 3–7) is a description of the five khandhas, āyatanas, the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the practise of Vipassanā (insight) through the development of wisdom. It emphasizes different forms of knowledge emerging because of the practice. This part shows a great analytical effort specific to Buddhist philosophy. This basic outline is based on the threefold discipline. The emphasis is on understanding the three marks of existence, which removes ignorance. Understanding destroys the ten fetters and leads to Nibbana.

Theravādins believe that every individual is personally responsible for achieving their own self-awakening and liberation, each being responsible for their own karma (actions and consequences). Applying knowledge acquired through direct experience and personal realization is more heavily emphasized than beliefs about the nature of reality as revealed by the Buddha.

Moral conduct

Giving (Dana) is an important Buddhist virtue. The community of monastics is seen as the most meritorious field of karmic fruitfulness.

Sīla, meaning moral conduct, is mainly defined as right speech, right action, and right livelihood. It is primarily understood through the doctrine of kamma. In Theravāda, one's previous intentional actions strongly influence one's present experience. Whatever intended actions are carried out will have future consequences, whether in this life or subsequent lives.[158] Intention is central to the idea of kamma. Actions done with good intentions, even if they have bad results, will not have negative kammic consequences.

Several sets of precepts or moral trainings (sikkhāpada) guide right action. After taking Refuge in the Triple Gems, lay Theravādin Buddhists traditionally take the Five precepts (whether for life or for a limited time) in the presence of Sangha.[159] Laypeople also sometimes take an extended set of Eight precepts, which includes chastity during sacred days of observance such as Uposatha.

Performing good deeds is another important feature of Theravādin Buddhist ethics. Doing so is said to make "merit" (puñña), which results in a better rebirth. The "ten wholesome actions" is a common list of good deeds:[160]

Generosity (Dāna); This typically involves providing monks with "the four requisites"; food, clothing, shelter, and medicine; however, giving to charity and the needy is also considered dāna.

Moral conduct (Sīla); Keeping the five precepts and generally refraining from doing harm.

Meditation (Bhāvanā).

Dedication of merit; doing good deeds in the name of someone who has passed away or in the name of all sentient beings.

Rejoicing in merit of good deeds done by others, this is common in communal activities.
Rendering service to others; looking after others or needy.

Honoring others; showing appropriate deference, particularly to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and to seniors and parents. Usually done by placing the hands together in Añjali Mudrā, and sometimes bowing.

Preaching or sharing the Dhamma; the gift of Dhamma is seen as a form of highest gift. (Dhammapada 354)

Listening to Dhamma

Having right view or Sammādiṭṭhi; mainly the Four Noble Truths and the three marks of existence.

Meditation

Main article: Buddhist meditation

Theravādin monks meditating in Bodh Gaya (Bihar, India)

Meditation (Pāli: Bhāvanā, literally "causing to become" or cultivation) means the positive cultivation of one's mind.

Forms

Theravāda Buddhist meditation practice varies considerably in technique and objects. [161] Currently, there are also various traditions of Theravāda meditation practice, such as the Burmese Vipassana tradition, the Thai Forest Tradition, the esoteric Borān kammaṭṭhāna ('ancient practices'), the Burmese Weikza tradition, Dhammakaya meditation and the Western Insight Meditation movement.

Theravāda Buddhist meditation practices or Bhavana (mental cultivation) are categorized into two broad categories: Samatha bhavana (calming), and Vipassanā bhavana (investigation, insight).[web 9] Originally these referred to effects or qualities of meditation, but after the time of Buddhaghosa, they also referred to two distinct meditation types or paths (yāna).[162][163][web 3]

Samatha ("calm") consists of meditation techniques in which the mind is focused on a single object, thought, or gatha, leading to Samādhi'. In traditional Theravāda it is considered to be the base for vipassanā ("insight"). In the Theravāda-tradition, as early as the Pāli Nikayas, the four jhānas are regarded as a samatha-practice. The eighth and final step of the Eightfold Path, Right Samadhi, is often defined as the four jhanas.[164] In the Pāli Nikayas, Jhānas are described as preceding the awakening insight of the Buddha, which turned him into an awakened being.[web 10] Yet the interpretation of jhana as single-pointed concentration and calm may be a later re-interpretation in which the original aim of jhana was lost.[165]

Vipassana ("insight", "clear seeing") refers to practices that aim to develop an inner understanding or knowledge of the nature of phenomena (dhammas), especially the characteristics of dukkha, anatta and anicca, which are seen as being universally applicable to all constructed phenomena (sankhata-dhammas). Vipassana is also described as insight into dependent origination, the five aggregates, the sense spheres

and the Four Noble Truths.[166][163] It is the primary focus of the modernist Burmese Vipassana movement. In western countries it is complemented with the four divine abidings, the development of loving-kindness and compassion.[167][168]

Vipassana practice begins with the preparatory stage, the practice of sila, morality, giving up worldly thoughts and desires.[169][170] The practitioner then engages in anapanasati, mindfulness of breathing, which is described in the Satipatthana Sutta as going into the forest and sitting beneath a tree and then simply to watch the breath. If the breath is long, to notice that the breath is long, if the breath is short, to notice that the breath is short.[171][172] In the "New Burmese Method" the practitioner pays attention to any arising mental or physical phenomenon, engaging in vitaka, noting or naming physical and mental phenomena ("breathing, breathing"), without engaging the phenomenon with conceptual thinking.[173][174] By noticing the arising of physical and mental phenomena the meditator becomes aware of how sense impressions arise from the contact between the senses and physical and mental phenomena,[173] as described in the five skandhas and paṭiccasamuppāda. The practitioner also becomes aware of the perpetual changes involved in breathing, and the arising and passing away of mindfulness.[175] This noticing is accompanied by reflections on causation and other Buddhist teachings, leading to insight into dukkha, anatta, and anicca.[176][175] When the three characteristics have been comprehended, reflection subdues and the process of noticing accelerates, noting phenomena in general without necessarily naming them. [177][178][179]

According to Vajiranāṇa Mahathera, writing from a traditional and text-based point of view, in the Pāli Canon whether one begins the practice by way of samatha or by way of vipassanā is generally seen as depending on one's temperament. According to Vajiranāṇa Mahathera, it is generally held that there are two kinds of individuals. Those of a passionate disposition (or those who enter the path by faith) attain Arahantship through vipassanā preceded by samatha. Those of a skeptical disposition (or those who enter by way of wisdom or the intellect) achieve it through samatha preceded by vipassanā.[163]

Aims of meditation

Ajahn Mun, a key figure in the founding of the Thai Forest Tradition, is widely considered to have been an Arahant in Thailand.[180]

Traditionally, the ultimate goal of the practice is to achieve mundane and supramundane wisdom. Mundane wisdom is the insight in the three marks of existence.[web 3] The development of this insight leads to four supramundane paths and fruits, these experiences consist a direct apprehension of Nibbana.[web 11] Supramundane (lokuttara) wisdom refers to that which transcends the world of samsara.[web 11]

Apart from nibbana, there are various reasons why traditional Theravāda Buddhism advocates meditation, including a good rebirth, supranormal powers, combating fear and preventing danger. Recent modernist Theravādins have tended to focus on the

psychological benefits and psychological well-being.[181]

Historical development and sources

The practice of Theravāda meditation can be traced back to the 5th century exegete Buddhaghosa, who systematized the classic Theravāda meditation, dividing them into samatha and vipassana types and listing 40 different forms (known as "kammaṭṭhānas", "workplaces") in his magnum opus, the Visuddhimagga.[182][183] This text has remained central for the study and practice of Theravāda meditation. Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Satipatthana sutta ("Bases of mindfulness discourse"), as well as the source text itself, are also another important source for meditation in this tradition. [184] Buddhaghosa's work drew heavily on the Pali suttas as well as the Pali Abhidhamma. Kate Crosby notes that Buddhaghosa's work also "explicitly refers to the contemporaneous existence of secret meditation manuals but not to their content." [184]

Regarding post Visuddhimagga Theravāda meditation, according to Kate Crosby,

In the period between the Visuddhimagga and the present, there have been numerous meditation texts, both manuals and descriptive treatises. Many of the texts found in manuscript collections relate to meditation, some on a single, simple subject such as the recollection of the qualities of the Buddha, others more complex. Little research has been done to assess their variety. One difficulty is that meditation manuals as such are often in a mixture of a classical language, that is, Pali, and a vernacular that may or may not be a currently used language. Also, actual manuals often contain prompts or reminders rather than an in-depth explanation. In recent years it has emerged that there is still extant a relatively high number of manuals and related texts pertaining to a system of meditation called – among other things – borān kammaṭṭhāna or yogāvacara. Its core text, the Mūla-kammaṭṭhāna "original, fundamental or basic meditation practice," circulated under a number of different titles, or without a title, throughout the Tai–Lao–Khmer and Sri Lankan Buddhist worlds. Some versions of this text are simple lists of kammaṭṭhāna and from that perspective look entirely in accord with the Visuddhimagga or Theravada Abhidhamma texts. Other versions contain extensive narratives, explanations of symbolism, and of the somatic locations involved in the practice that make it clear that we are dealing with techniques of practice not described in the Canon or Visuddhimagga.[184]

According to Crosby, the esoteric borān kammaṭṭhāna or yogāvacara meditation tradition was the dominant form of meditation in the Theravāda world during the 18th century, and may date as far back as the 16th century. Crosby notes that this tradition of meditation involved a rich collection of symbols, somatic methods and visualizations which included "the physical internalisation or manifestation of aspects of the Theravada path by incorporating them at points in the body between the nostril and navel." [185] In spite of the novel elements in this meditation tradition, close study of borān kammaṭṭhāna texts reveals that they are closely connected to Theravada Abhidhamma and the works of Buddhaghosa.[186] Modernist reforms which emphasized Pali Canon study, a shift in state support to other traditions and modern wars in Indochina led to this

tradition's decline, and it now only survives in a few Cambodian and Thai temples.[187]

Mahasi Sayadaw

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Theravāda world saw a modernist revival and reinvention of meditation practice, as exemplified by the Burmese Vipassana movement. [188][189] According to Buswell vipassana, "appears to have fallen out of practice" by the 10th century, due to the belief that Buddhism had degenerated, and that liberation was no longer attainable until the coming of Maitreya.[190] The practice was revived in Myanmar (Burma) in the 18th century by Medawi (1728–1816) and by later figures such as Ledi Sayadaw and Mahāsī Sayadaw during the 19th and 20th centuries. These Burmese figures re-invented vipassana-meditation and developed simplified meditation techniques, based on the Satipatthana sutta, the Visuddhimagga, and other texts, emphasizing satipatthana and bare insight.[188][189] These techniques were globally popularized by the Vipassana movement in the second half of the 20th century.

Similar revival movements developed in Thailand, such as the Thai forest tradition and Dhammakaya meditation. These traditions are influenced by the older borān kammaṭṭhāna forms.[191] Thailand and Cambodia also saw attempts to preserve and revive the ancient "borān kammaṭṭhāna" tradition of meditation.[192] In Sri Lanka, the new Buddhist traditions of the Amarapura and Rāmañña Nikāyas developed their own meditation forms based on the Pali Suttas, the Visuddhimagga, and other manuals, while borān kammaṭṭhāna mostly disappeared by the end of the 19th century.[193]

Though the Vipassana movement has popularised meditation both in traditional Theravāda countries among the laity, and in western countries, "meditation plays a minor if not negligible role in the lives of the majority of Theravāda monks." [194][195] [web 1] Meditation is especially popular laypersons,[196] especially during special religious holidays or in their old age, when they have more free time to spend at the temple.[195] Buddhist modernists tend to present Buddhism as rational and scientific, and this has also affected how Vipassana meditation has been taught and presented. This has led in some quarters to a playing down of older non-empirical elements of Theravāda, associated with 'superstition'. [197] Strains of older, traditional Theravāda meditation known as "borān kammaṭṭhāna" still exist, but this tradition has mostly been eclipsed by the Buddhist modernist meditation movements.[187]

Other practices

Circumambulation around a temple or a stupa is also a common devotional practice. Laypersons and monks also perform various types of religious practices daily or during Buddhist holidays. One of these is keeping a Buddhist shrine with a picture or statue of the Buddha for devotional practice in one's home, mirroring the larger shrines at temples.[198] It is common to offer candles, incense, flowers and other objects to these shrine.[198] Gestures of respect are also done in front of Buddha images and shrines, mainly the respectful salutation with the hands (añjalikamma), and the five-limb

prostration (pañc'anga-vandana).[198]

Buddhist forms of chanting is also widely practiced by both monks and laypersons, who may recite famous phrases such as the taking of refuge, the Metta Sutta and the Mangala Sutta in front of their shrine. Chanting may also be part of the practice of recollection (anussati), which refers to contemplating various topics such as the sublime qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha or the five subjects for daily recollection. [198] This may be done as part of a daily puja ritual.

Another important religious practice for the devout is the keeping of special religious holidays known as Uposatha which are based on a lunar calendar. Laypersons commonly take the eight precepts while visiting a temple or monastery and commit to focusing on Buddhist practice for the day.[198]

Study (ganthadhura) of the Buddhist texts and listening to Dhamma talks by monks or teachers are also important practices.

Lay and monastic life

See also: Buddhist monasticism

Young Burmese monk

Distinction between lay and monastic life

Traditionally, Theravāda Buddhism has observed a distinction between the practices suitable for a lay person and the practices undertaken by ordained monks (in ancient times, there was a separate body of practices for nuns). While the possibility of significant attainment by laymen is not entirely disregarded by the Theravāda, it generally occupies a position of less prominence than in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, with monastic life being hailed as a superior method of achieving Nibbana. [199] The view that Theravāda, unlike other Buddhist schools, is primarily a monastic tradition has, however, been disputed.

Some Western scholars have erroneously tried to claim that Mahāyāna is primarily a religion for laymen and Theravāda is a primarily monastic religion. Both Mahāyāna and Theravāda have as their foundation strong monastic communities, which are almost identical in their regulations. Schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism without monastic communities of fully ordained monks and nuns are relatively recent and atypical developments, usually based on cultural and historical considerations rather than differences in fundamental doctrine. Both Mahāyāna and Theravāda also provided a clear and important place for lay followers.

—Ron Epstein, "Clearing Up Some Misconceptions about Buddhism"[200]
[dead link]

This distinction between ordained monks and laypeople – as well as the distinction between those practices advocated by the Pāli Canon, and the folk religious elements

embraced by many monks – have motivated some scholars to consider Theravāda Buddhism to be composed of multiple separate traditions, overlapping though still distinct. Most prominently, the anthropologist Melford Spiro in his work *Buddhism and Society* separated Burmese Theravāda into three groups: Apotropaic Buddhism (concerned with providing protection from evil spirits), Kammatic Buddhism (concerned with making merit for a future birth), and Nibbanic Buddhism (concerned with attaining the liberation of Nibbana, as described in the Tipitaka). He stresses that all three are firmly rooted in the Pāli Canon. These categories are not accepted by all scholars, and are usually considered non-exclusive by those who employ them.[citation needed]

The role of lay people has traditionally been primarily occupied with activities that are commonly termed merit-making (falling under Spiro's category of kammatic Buddhism). Merit-making activities include offering food and other basic necessities to monks, making donations to temples and monasteries, burning incense or lighting candles before images of the Buddha, chanting protective or scriptural verses from the Pali Canon, building roads and bridges, charity to the needy and providing drinking water to strangers along roadside. Some lay practitioners have always chosen to take a more active role in religious affairs, while still maintaining their lay status. Dedicated lay men and women sometimes act as trustees or custodians for their temples, taking part in the financial planning and management of the temple. Others may volunteer significant time in tending to the mundane needs of local monks (by cooking, cleaning, maintaining temple facilities, etc.). Study of the Pāli scriptures and the practice of meditation are less common among the lay community in the past, though in the 20th century these areas have become more popular to the lay community, especially in Thailand.

Thai monks on pilgrimage in their orange robes

A number of senior monastics in the Thai Forest Tradition, including Buddhadasa, Ajahn Maha Bua, Ajahn Plien Panyapatipo, Ajahn Pasanno, and Ajahn Jayasaro, have begun teaching meditation retreats outside of the monastery for lay disciples. Ajahn Sumedho, a disciple of Ajahn Chah, founded the Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire, which has a retreat center specifically for lay retreats. Sumedho extended this to Harnham in Northumberland as Aruna Ratanagiri under the present guidance of Ajahn Munindo, another disciple of Ajahn Chah.[citation needed]

Lay devotee

The ceremony walks with lighted candles in hand around a temple on Vesakha Puja in Uttaradit, Thailand.

In Pāli the word for a male lay devotee is Upasaka and a female devotee is Upasika. One of the duties of the lay followers, as taught by the Buddha, is to look after the needs of the monk/nuns. They are to see that the monk/nuns do not suffer from lack of the four requisites: food, clothing, shelter and medicine. As neither monks nor nuns are allowed to have an occupation, they depend entirely on the laity for their sustenance. In return for this charity, they are expected to lead exemplary lives.

In Myanmar and Thailand, the monastery was and is still regarded as a seat of learning. Theravādin monasteries have been providing free education to many children since ancient times. In fact, today about half of the primary schools in Thailand are located in monasteries. Religious rituals and ceremonies held in a monastery are always accompanied by social activities. In times of crisis, it is to the monks that people bring their problems for counsel and monks often took up the role of mediators in most disputes. Traditionally, a ranking monk will deliver a sermon four times a month: when the moon waxes and wanes and the day before the new and full moons. The laity also have a chance to learn meditation from the monks during these times.

It is also possible for a lay disciple to become enlightened. As Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, "The Suttas and commentaries do record a few cases of lay disciples attaining the final goal of Nirvana. However, such disciples either attain Arahantship on the brink of death or enter the monastic order soon after their attainment. They do not continue to dwell at home as Arahant householders, for dwelling at home is incompatible with the state of one who has severed all craving." [201]

In the modern era, it is now common for lay disciples to practice meditation, attend lay meditation centers and even aim for awakening. The impetus for this trend began in Myanmar and was supported by prime minister U Nu who himself established the International Meditation Center (IMC) in Yangon. [202] Modern lay teachers such as U Ba Khin (who was also the Accountant General of the Union of Burma) promoted meditation as part of a laypersons daily routine. [202] According to Donald K Swearer, another development in modern Theravāda is "the formation of lay Buddhist associations that have partially assumed the social service responsibilities formerly associated with the monastery". [202] These include social service and activist organizations such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association of Colombo, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, the Sarvodaya Shramadana of A. T. Ariyaratne, the NGO's founded by Sulak Sivaraksa such as Santi Pracha. [203]

Monastic vocation

A cave kuti (hut) in the Sri Lankan forest monastery Na Uyana Aranya Theravāda sources dating back to medieval Sri Lanka (2nd century BCE to 10th century CE) such as the Mahavamsa show that monastic roles in the tradition were often seen as being in a polarity between urban monks (Sinhala: khaamawaasii, Pāli: gāmavasī) on one end and rural forest monks (Sinhala: aranyawaasii, Pali: araññavasi, nagaravasi, also known as Tapassin) on the other. [204] The ascetic focused monks were known by the names Pamsukulikas (rag robe wearers) and Araññikas (forest dwellers). [205]

The Mahavamsa mentions forest monks associated with the Mahavihara. The Pāli Dhammapada Commentary mentions another split based on the "duty of study" and the "duty of contemplation". [206] This second division has traditionally been seen as corresponding with the city – forest split, with the city monks focusing on the vocation of

books (ganthadhura) or learning (pariyatti) while the forest monks leaning more towards meditation (vipassanadhura) and practice (patipatti).[18] However this opposition is not consistent, and urban monasteries have often promoted meditation while forest communities have also produced excellent scholars, such as the Island Hermitage of Nyanatiloka.[18]

Scholar monks generally undertake the path of studying and preserving Theravāda's Pāli literature.[207] Forest monks tend to be the minority among Theravāda sanghas and also tend to focus on asceticism (dhutanga) and meditative praxis.[208] They view themselves as living closer to the ideal set forth by the Buddha, and are often perceived as such by lay folk, while at the same time often being on the margins of the Buddhist establishment and on the periphery of the social order.[209]

While this divide seems to have been in existence for some time in the Theravāda school, only in the 10th century is a specifically forest monk monastery, mentioned as existing near Anuradhapura, called "Tapavana".[210] This division was then carried over into the rest of Southeast Asia as Theravāda spread.

Today there are forest based traditions in most Theravāda countries, including the Sri Lankan Forest Tradition, the Thai Forest Tradition as well as lesser known forest based traditions in Burma and Laos, such as the Burmese forest based monasteries (taw"yar) of the Pa Auk Sayadaw.[211] In Thailand, forest monks are known as phra thudong (ascetic wandering monks) or phra thudong kammathan (wandering ascetic meditator). [212]

Ordination

Candidates for the Buddhist monkhood being ordained as monks in Thailand
The minimum age for ordaining as a Buddhist monk is 20 years, which is calculated from conception. Those under this age can perform traditional ceremonies such as shinbyu, in Myanmar, in order to ordain as novices (sāmaṇera). Novices shave their heads, wear the yellow robes, and observe the Ten Precepts. While there is no explicit minimum age for novices prescribed in the scriptures, it is traditionally accepted that boys as young as seven can be accepted for ordination. This tradition echoes the story of the Buddha's son, Rahula, who was allowed to become a novice at the age of seven. Both monks and nuns are expected to adhere to a specific code of discipline, of which monks follow 227 rules, and nuns follow 311.

In most Theravāda countries, it is a common practice for young men to ordain as monks for a fixed period of time. In Thailand and Myanmar, young men typically ordain for the retreat during Vassa, the three-month monsoon season, though shorter or longer periods of ordination are not rare. Traditionally, temporary ordination was even more flexible among Laotians. Once they had undergone their initial ordination as young men, Laotian men were permitted to temporarily ordain again at any time, though married men were expected to seek their wife's permission. Throughout Southeast Asia, there is

little stigma attached to leaving the monastic life. Monks regularly leave the robes after acquiring an education, or when compelled by family obligations or ill health.

Ordaining as a monk, even for a short period, is seen as having many virtues. In many Southeast Asian cultures, it is seen as a means for a young man to "repay his gratitude" to his parents for their work and effort in raising him, because the merit from his ordination is dedicated for their well-being. Thai men who have ordained as a monk may be seen as more mature and suitable husbands by Thai women, who refer to men who have served as monks with a colloquial term meaning "ripe" to indicate that they are more mature and ready for marriage. Particularly in rural areas, temporary ordination of boys and young men traditionally offered peasant boys an opportunity to receive free education in temple schools with sponsorship and accommodation.

In Sri Lanka, temporary ordination is not practised, and a monk leaving the order is frowned upon but not condemned. The continuing influence of the caste system in Sri Lanka plays a role in the taboo against temporary or permanent ordination as a bhikkhu in some orders. Though Sri Lankan orders are often organized along caste lines, men who ordain as monks temporarily pass outside of the conventional caste system, and as such during their time as monks may act (or be treated) in a way that would not be in line with the expected duties and privileges of their caste.[citation needed]

For those born in Western countries who wish to become Buddhist monks or nuns, it is possible to undertake the lifestyle in their home countries, among other Buddhist monastics in Western countries, or to travel and take up residence in a Buddhist monastery in Asian countries such as Sri Lanka or Thailand. In countries where Buddhism is deeply rooted, it can often be easier to adhere to the lifestyle of a monk or nun, as it requires considerable discipline to successfully live by the non-secular rules and regulations for which Buddhist practices are known. For instance, Theravāda monastics are typically required to abstain from activities such as working, handling money, listening to music and cooking. Such obligations can be especially challenging in non-Buddhist societies.[citation needed]

Some of the more well-known Theravādin monks are Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah, Ledi Sayadaw, Webu Sayadaw, Narada Maha Thera, Ajahn Plien Panyapatipo, Buddhadasa, Mahasi Sayadaw, Nyanatiloka Mahathera, Nyanaponika Thera, Preah Maha Ghosananda, U Pandita, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Khemadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn Sucitto, Ajahn Jayasaro, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Walpola Rahula Thero, Henepola Gunaratana, Bhaddanta Āciṇṇa, Bhante Yogavacara Rahula, Luang Pu Sodh Candasaro, K. Sri Dhammananda, Sayadaw U Tejaniya and Bhikkhu Analayo.

Monastic practices

A Buddhist Monk chants evening prayers inside a monastery located near the town of Kantharalak, Thailand.

The practices usually vary in different sub-schools and monasteries within Theravāda.

But in the most orthodox forest monastery, the monk usually models his practice and lifestyle on that of the Buddha and his first generation of disciples by living close to nature in forest, mountains and caves. Forest monasteries still keep alive the ancient traditions through following the Buddhist monastic code of discipline in all its detail and developing meditation in secluded forests.

In a typical daily routine at the monastery during the 3-month vassa period, the monk will wake up before dawn and will begin the day with group chanting and meditation. At dawn the monks will go out to surrounding villages bare-footed on alms-round and will have the only meal of the day before noon by eating from the bowl by hand. Most of the time is spent on Dhamma study and meditation. Sometimes the abbot or a senior monk will give a Dhamma talk to the visitors. Laity who stay at the monastery will have to abide by the traditional eight Buddhist precepts.

The life of the monk or nun in a community is much more complex than the life of the forest monk. In the Buddhist society of Sri Lanka, most monks spend hours every day in taking care of the needs of lay people such as preaching dhamma, accepting alms, officiating funerals, teaching dhamma to adults and children in addition to providing social services to the community.

After the end of the Vassa period, many of the monks will go out far away from the monastery to find a remote place (usually in the forest) where they can hang their umbrella tents and where it is suitable for the work of self-development. When they go wandering, they walk barefoot, and go wherever they feel inclined. Only those requisites which are necessary will be carried along. These generally consist of the bowl, the three robes, a bathing cloth, an umbrella tent, a mosquito net, a kettle of water, a water filter, razor, sandals, some small candles, and a candle lantern.

The monks do not fix their times for walking and sitting meditation, for as soon as they are free, they just start doing it; nor do they determine for how long they will go on to meditate. Some of them sometimes walk from dusk to dawn whereas at other times they may walk from between two and seven hours. Some may decide to fast for days or stay at dangerous places where ferocious animals live in order to aid their meditation.

Those monks who have been able to achieve a high level of attainment will be able to guide the junior monks and lay Buddhists toward the four degrees of spiritual attainment.

Bhikkhunis

See also: Women in Buddhism, Ordination of women in Buddhism, and Criticism of Buddhism § Women in Buddhism

Dhammananda Bhikkhuni

A few years after the arrival of Mahinda, the bhikkhu Saṅghamittā, who is also believed to have been the daughter of Ashoka, came to Sri Lanka. She ordained the first nuns in

Sri Lanka. In 429, by request of China's emperor, nuns from Anuradhapura were sent to China to establish the order there, which subsequently spread across East Asia. The prātimokṣa of the nun's order in East Asian Buddhism is the Dharmaguptaka, which is different from the prātimokṣa of the current Theravāda school; the specific ordination of the early Sangha in Sri Lanka not known, although the Dharmaguptaka sect originated with the Sthāvirīya as well.

The nun's order subsequently died out in Sri Lanka in the 11th century and in Burma in the 13th century. It had already died out around the 10th century in other Theravādin areas. Novice ordination has also disappeared in those countries. Therefore, women who wish to live as renunciates in those countries must do so by taking eight or ten precepts. Neither laywomen nor formally ordained, these women do not receive the recognition, education, financial support or status enjoyed by Buddhist men in their countries. These "precept-holders" live in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, and Thailand. In particular, the governing council of Burmese Buddhism has ruled that there can be no valid ordination of women in modern times, though some Burmese monks disagree. Japan is a special case as, although it has neither the bhikkhuni nor novice ordinations, the precept-holding nuns who live there do enjoy a higher status and better education than their precept-holder sisters elsewhere, and can even become Zen priests.[214] In Tibet there is currently no bhikkhuni ordination, but the Dalai Lama has authorized followers of the Tibetan tradition to be ordained as nuns in traditions that have such ordination.

In 1996, 11 selected Sri Lankan women were ordained fully as Theravāda bhikkhunis by a team of Theravāda monks in concert with a team of Korean nuns in India. There is disagreement among Theravāda vinaya authorities as to whether such ordinations are valid. The Dambulla chapter of the Siam Nikaya in Sri Lanka also carried out a nun's ordination at this time, specifically stating their ordination process was a valid Theravādin process where the other ordination session was not.[215] This chapter has carried out ordination ceremonies for hundreds of nuns since then.[citation needed] This has been criticized by leading figures in the Siam Nikaya and Amarapura Nikaya, and the governing council of Buddhism in Myanmar has declared that there can be no valid ordination of nuns in modern times, though some Burmese monks disagree with this. [216]

In 1997 Dhamma Cetiya Vihara in Boston was founded by Ven. Gotami of Thailand, then a 10 precept nun; when she received full ordination in 2000, her dwelling became America's first Theravāda Buddhist bhikkhuni vihara.

A 55-year-old Thai Buddhist 8-precept white-robed maechee nun, Varanggana Vanavichayen, became the first woman to receive the going-forth ceremony of a novice (and the gold robe) in Thailand, in 2002.[217] On 28 February 2003, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, formerly known as Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, became the first Thai woman to receive bhikkhuni ordination as a Theravāda nun.[218] Dhammananda Bhikkhuni was ordained in Sri Lanka.[219] The Thai Senate has reviewed and revoked the secular law

passed in 1928 banning women's full ordination in Buddhism as unconstitutional for being counter to laws protecting freedom of religion. However, Thailand's two main Theravāda Buddhist orders, the Mahanikaya and Dhammayutika Nikaya, have yet to officially accept fully ordained women into their ranks.

In 2009 in Australia four women received bhikkhuni ordination as Theravāda nuns, the first time such ordination had occurred in Australia.[220] It was performed in Perth, Australia, on 22 October 2009 at Bodhinyana Monastery. Abbess Vayama together with Venerables Nirodha, Seri, and Hasapanna were ordained as Bhikkhunis by a dual Sangha act of Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis in full accordance with the Pāli Vinaya.[221]

In 2010, in the US, four novice nuns were given the full bhikkhuni ordination in the Thai Theravāda tradition, which included the double ordination ceremony. Henepola Gunaratana and other monks and nuns were in attendance. It was the first such ordination ever in the Western hemisphere.[222]

The first bhikkhuni ordination in Germany, the ordination of German woman Samaneri Dhira, occurred on 21 June 2015 at Anenja Vihara.[223]

In Indonesia, the first Theravāda ordination of bhikkhunis in Indonesia after more than a thousand years occurred in 2015 at Wisma Kusalayani in Lembang, Bandung in West Java.[224] Those ordained included Vajiradevi Sadhika Bhikkhuni from Indonesia, Medha Bhikkhuni from Sri Lanka, Anula Bhikkhuni from Japan, Santasukha Santamana Bhikkhuni from Vietnam, Sukhi Bhikkhuni and Sumangala Bhikkhuni from Malaysia, and Jenti Bhikkhuni from Australia.[224]

Monastic orders

Thai monks blessing the King of Thailand in Wat Nong Wong, Amphoe Sawankhalok, Sukhothai, Thailand

Theravāda monks typically belong to a particular nikaya, variously referred to as monastic orders or fraternities. These different orders do not typically develop separate doctrines, but may differ in the manner in which they observe monastic rules. These monastic orders represent lineages of ordination, typically tracing their origin to a particular group of monks that established a new ordination tradition within a particular country or geographic area.

In Myanmar, all the monastic orders are called gaing (ဂေါင်) or gaṇa (ဂဏ) instead of nikāya, although some orders include Nikāya (နိကာယ) in addition to Gaing in their names. Currently, it is prohibited by law to establish gaings other than the nine major gaings sanctioned in 1980. Other monastic orders and sects have to merge with these nine gaings, while some sects are totally banned.

In Sri Lanka caste plays a major role in the division into nikayas. Some Theravāda

Buddhist countries appoint or elect a sangharaja, or Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha, as the highest ranking or seniormost monk in a particular area, or from a particular nikaya. The demise of monarchies has resulted in the suspension of these posts in some countries, but patriarchs have continued to be appointed in Thailand. Cambodia ended the practice of appointing a sangharaja for some time, but the position was later restored, though it lapsed again.[citation needed]

Bangladesh:

Mahasthabir Nikaya

Sangharaj Nikaya

Myanmar:

Thudhamma Gaing

Shwegyin Nikāya Shwegyin Gaing

Dhammānudhamma Mahādvāra Nikāya Gaing

Dhammavinayānuloma Mūladvāra Nikāya Gaing

Anaukchaung Dvāra Gaing

Veḷuvan Nikāya Gaing

Catubhummika Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Hngettwin Gaing

Gaṇavimut Kudo Gaing

Dhammayutti Nikāya Mahā Yin Gaing

Sri Lanka:

Amarapura Nikaya has many Sub orders including

Dharmarakshitha

Kanduboda (or Swejin Nikaya)

Tapovana (or Kalyanavamsa)

Ramañña Nikaya

Delduwa

Sri Kalyani Yogasrama Samstha (or 'Galduwa Tradition')

Siam Nikaya

Asgiriya

Malwaththa

Rohana

Waturawila (or Mahavihara Vamshika Shyamopali Vanavasa Nikaya)

Thailand and Cambodia

Dhammayuttika Nikaya

Maha Nikaya

Impact on modern society

Theravada monks meditating and practicing mindfulness over simple things like the meal they are about to have

Theravāda Buddhism's emphasis on mindfulness and meditation practices has influenced modern society by promoting mental well-being and stress reduction techniques leading to the integration of mindfulness in various therapeutic and self-improvement programs. Additionally, its teachings on ethical conduct and compassion continue to inspire individuals and organizations to prioritize moral values and social responsibility in their actions and decision-making.[225] The emphasis on ethical

conduct in Theravada Buddhism encourages individuals to lead virtuous lives. This includes refraining from actions that harm others, such as lying, stealing, and harming living beings. These principles promote personal integrity and honesty in modern society. Buddhism encourages the cultivation of compassion and loving-kindness (metta) towards all sentient beings. In contemporary society, these teachings inspire individuals and organizations to prioritize social responsibility, charitable activities, and humanitarian efforts aimed at alleviating suffering and promoting the welfare of others. [226] Theravada Buddhism places significant emphasis on self-awareness and self-transformation. Practitioners are encouraged to explore the nature of the self (anatta), impermanence (anicca), and the nature of suffering (dukkha). These teachings have inspired individuals in modern society to embark on journeys of self-discovery, self-improvement, and personal growth. The teachings on mindfulness and the impermanence of life have provided individuals with effective tools for coping with stress and life's challenges. In today's fast-paced and often stressful world, these teachings offer valuable strategies for maintaining balance and emotional stability.[227] This journey of mindfulness and mental health has been strengthened by top institutions encouraging the idea of mindfulness and the effects it has on people. The mindfulness classes/courses/programs provided by many top universities and institutions such as Yale, Stanford, etc. to their students, staff, and general public have benefited them[228]

Demographics

Rank	Country	Population	Buddhist %	Buddhist total	Importance of religion
1	Thailand	66,720,153[web 12]	95%[web 13]	63,117,265	97%[web 14]
2	Myanmar	56,280,000[web 15]	89%[web 16]	50,649,200	96%[web 14]
3	Sri Lanka	20,277,597	70%	17,222,844	100%[web 14]
4	Cambodia	14,701,717[web 17]	98%[web 17]	14,172,455	95%[web 14]
5	Laos	6,477,211[web 18]	67%[web 18]	4,339,731	98%[web 14]

Map showing the three major Buddhist divisions in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, East and Southeast Asia

Theravāda Buddhism is practiced in the following countries and by people worldwide:

East Asia:

China (mainly by the Shan, Tai, Dai, Hani, Wa, Achang, Blang ethnic groups mainly in Yunnan)

South Asia:

Bangladesh (by 2% of the population) mainly in Chittagong Hill Tracts and Kuwakata, Barishal

India, traditional Theravāda mainly in the Seven Sister States

Nepal

Sri Lanka (by 70% of the population)

Southeast Asia:

Cambodia (by 97% of the population)

Indonesia

Laos (by 66% of the population)

Malaysia (in peninsular Malaysia especially north-western parts of Malaysia, primarily by the Malaysian Siamese and Malaysian Sinhalese)

Myanmar (by 89% of the population)

Singapore

Thailand (by 90% of the population, 94% of the population that practices religion)

Vietnam (by the Khmer Krom in the south and central parts of Vietnam and Tai Dam in northern Vietnam)

Theravāda has also recently gained popularity in the Western world.

Today, Theravādins number over 150 million worldwide, and during the past few decades Theravāda Buddhism has begun to take root in the West[c] and in the Buddhist revival in India.[web 20]

See also

Access to Insight

Adhiṭṭhāna

Arahant

Awgatha

Buddha Sasana

Buddhism in Southeast Asia

Buddhist pilgrimage

Buddhist Publication Society

Cetiya

Fruits of the noble path

Mahanayaka

Pariyatti, paṭipatti, paṭivedha

Sacca-kiriya

Sambuddhatva jayanthi

Sangharaja

Notes

Sinhala: ථෙරවාදය; Burmese: ထေရဝဒ; Thai: เถรวาท; Khmer: ថេរវាទ, UNGEGN:

Thérôvéat [tʰeːreaʔuiət]; Lao: ເຖຣະວາດ; MunhwaǾ Korean: 테라바다; Pali: ථට්ඨ

Theravāda; /ˌtɛrəˈvɑːdə/[a] lit. 'School of the Elders'; Chinese: 上座部佛教; Vietnamese:

Thượng tọa bộ)[1][2]

John Bullit: "In the last century, however, the West has begun to take notice of Theravāda's unique spiritual legacy and teachings of Awakening. In recent decades, this interest has swelled, with the monastic Sangha from the schools within Theravāda, establishing dozens of monasteries across Europe and North America." [web 19]

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(Pali: "Way of the Elders"; Sanskrit, Sthaviravada) emerged as one of the Hinayana (Sanskrit: "Lesser Vehicle") schools, traditionally numbered at 18, of early Buddhism. The Theravadins trace their lineage to the Sthaviravada school, one of the two major schools (the Mahasanghika was the other) that supposedly formed in the wake of the Council of Vaishali (now in Bihar state) held some 100 years after the Buddha's death. Employing Pāli as their sacred language, the Theravadins preserved their version of the Buddha's teaching in the Tipitaka ("Three Baskets").

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Desert Fathers found in Christian Esotericism

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Who Were the Desert Fathers (& Mothers)? | TheCollector

The Desert Fathers (and Mothers) are central to Christian Esotericism, not as secret teachers, but as pioneers of inner, mystical Christianity, emphasizing direct experience,

hesychia (inner stillness/prayer), and unification with God (theosis) through radical asceticism, profound contemplation, and battling inner demons (passions) in the Egyptian desert, influencing Eastern Orthodox mystics and Western contemplative traditions by showing the path to inner knowledge of Christ beyond mere doctrine, with figures like St. Anthony the Great and texts like the Sayings of the Desert Fathers being foundational.

Key Connections to Esotericism:

Inner Experience: They prioritized internal spiritual transformation (union with God) over external ritual or worldly religion, a core esoteric goal.

Mystical Practices: Their extreme solitude, fasting, prayer, and vigils were intense spiritual disciplines for achieving altered states of consciousness and divine presence.

Theosis (Deification): Their life's goal was to become wholly united with God, a concept central to Orthodox mysticism and esoteric thought.

Spiritual Warfare (Inner Demons): Their battles with demons (passions, temptations) were symbolic of the internal struggle for spiritual purity, a common esoteric theme.

Silence & Contemplation: Their emphasis on hesychia (the Jesus Prayer, inner stillness) directly links to contemplative traditions worldwide, including esoteric ones.

"The Desert as a City": The idea that the inner life becomes a populated spiritual landscape is deeply mystical, notes this Wikipedia article and this article from Jesus.net.

How They Appear in Esoteric Thought:

Mystical Roots: They established the foundational practices for all Christian mysticism, influencing figures later associated with esoteric movements.

Universal Wisdom: Their simple yet profound sayings (Apophthegmata Patrum) offer universal spiritual truths applicable across traditions, resonating with esoteric seekers.

Founders of Monasticism: They birthed Christian monasticism, a path of renunciation and devotion that became a primary vehicle for esoteric Christianity, as described in this article from Lighthouse Trails Research.

In essence, the Desert Fathers provided the practical, experiential blueprint for deep Christian spiritual life, forming the bedrock of esoteric Christianity's focus on inner transformation and direct encounter with the Divine, notes this YouTube video from the Armenian Apostolic Church and this article from Wind Ministries.

The Desert Fathers - An Introduction - Wind Ministries

Jan 1, 2017 — The desert fathers were experts on the spiritual life, teaching deep wisdom on prayer, humility, love, repentance, subm...

Wind Ministries

Desert Fathers - Wikipedia

The Desert Fathers were early Christian hermits and ascetics, who lived primarily in the Wadi El Natrun, then known as Skete, in R...

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Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Wadi El Natrun

Paul of Thebes

Arsenius the Great

Were Desert Fathers gnostics? : r/exorthodox

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42 answers

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Does anyone know anything about the Desert Fathers??

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Apr 4, 2025

Who were the Desert Fathers? What was their impact on ...

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St. Anthony the Abbot, the father of all monks and greatest of all Desert Fathers. Ines copying the old Roman and Greek texts in their ...

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Loto Wellness

<https://www.lotowellness.co> › journal › desert-mothers-...

The Desert Fathers and Mothers were early Christian mystics and ascetics in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, who lived in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, ...

The Desert Fathers—Borrowing From the East

Lighthouse Trails Research Project

<https://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com> › blog › the-de...

Mar 23, 2024 — In many ways, the Desert Fathers were like Cain—eager to please but not willing to listen to the instruction of the Lord and do what was right.

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Issue #4: Desert Spirituality: The Beginnings of Monasticism

robertfalconer.co.za

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Sep 1, 2025 — Some of the most enigmatic personalities in Christian spirituality are the Desert Fathers. They were early Christian hermits and ascetics ...

Sayings and Stories from the Desert Fathers

Benedictine Abbey of Christ in the Desert

<https://christdesert.org> › Prayer + Chant

The earliest Christian monks inhabited the desert land of the Middle East. Known as the “Desert Fathers”, they left everything in search of knowing Jesus Christ

On Lust

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On Humility

On Love

Videos

The Most Important Lesson I Learned from the Desert Fathers

YouTube · Gospel Simplicity

4 days ago

YouTube · Gospel Simplicity

10:09

The Desert Fathers taught humility was key to defeating the devil and living a Christian life.

What I've Learned from the Desert Fathers

YouTube · Gospel Simplicity

Jan 6, 2025

YouTube · Gospel Simplicity

19:25

In this video I'm going to talk about what I've learned from the desert fathers but I trust I'm going to learn so much more.

Start Your Day Like the Desert Fathers / Why They Became ...

YouTube · Discover Christian Mysticism with Jon Adams

Jun 3, 2025

YouTube · Discover Christian Mysticism with Jon Adams

19:45

Let's talk about the early Christian monks and solitaries. We'll get into some historical background on why people went out to the desert.

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The Impact of the Desert Fathers - Classically Christian

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Coptic icon of Anthony the Great

The Desert Fathers were early Christian hermits and ascetics, who lived primarily in the Wadi El Natrun, then known as Skete, in Roman Egypt, beginning around the third century. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers is a collection of saying and other texts attributed to desert monks and nuns from this era.

The first Desert Father was Paul of Thebes. The most well-known Anthony the Great, who moved to the desert in 270–271 and became known as both the father and founder of desert monasticism. By the time Anthony had died in 356, thousands of monks and nuns had been drawn to live in the desert following Anthony's example, leading his biographer, Athanasius of Alexandria, to write that "the desert had become a city."^[1] The Desert Fathers significantly influenced the development of Christianity.

The desert monastic communities that grew out of the informal gathering of hermit monks became the model for Christian monasticism, first influencing the Coptic communities these monks were a part of and preached to.^[2] Some were monophysites^[2] or believed in a similar idea.

The eastern monastic tradition at Mount Athos and the western Rule of Saint Benedict were both strongly influenced by the traditions that began in the desert. All of the monastic revivals of the Middle Ages looked to the desert for inspiration and guidance. Much of Eastern Christian spirituality, including the Hesychast movement, has its roots in the practices of the Desert Fathers. Even religious renewals such as the German evangelicals and Pietists in Pennsylvania, the Devotio Moderna movement, and the

Methodist Revival in England are seen by modern scholars as being influenced by the Desert Fathers.[3]

Early history

See also: Chronology of early Christian monasticism

"Saint Macarius and a Cherub" from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt

Paul of Thebes is often credited with being the first hermit monk to go to the desert, but it was Anthony the Great who launched the movement that became the Desert Fathers. [4] Sometime around 270, Anthony heard a Sunday sermon stating that perfection could be achieved by selling all of one's possessions, giving the proceeds to the poor, and following Jesus.[5] He followed the advice and made the further step of moving deep into the desert to seek complete solitude.[1]

Anthony lived in a time of transition for Christianity: the Diocletianic Persecution in 303 was the last great formal persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Only ten years later, Christianity was made legal in Egypt by Diocletian's successor, Constantine the Great. Those who left for the desert formed an alternate Christian society when becoming a Christian was no longer risky. Anthony saw the desert's solitude, austerity, and sacrifice as an alternative to martyrdom, which many Christians formerly saw as the highest form of sacrifice.[6] Anthony quickly gained followers eager to live their lives with solidarity and separation from material goods. From these prohibitions, Athanasius recorded that Anthony received special privileges from God, such as the ability to heal the sick, inspire others to have faith in healing through God, and even occasionally converse with God.[7]

Around this time, desert monasticism appeared nearly simultaneously in several areas, including Egypt and Roman Syria,[1] and some of the Desert Fathers's Coptic traditions also spread to Nubia.[2]

Fourth-century Desert Father from Ethiopia, Saint Onuphrius, lived in seclusion in the desert of Upper Egypt

Over time, the model of Anthony and other hermits attracted many followers, who lived alone in the desert or small groups. They chose a life of extreme asceticism, renouncing all the pleasures of the senses, rich food, baths, rest, and anything that made them comfortable.[8] They instead focused on praying, singing psalms, fasting, giving alms to the needy, and preserving love and harmony with one another while keeping their thoughts and desires for God alone.[7] Thousands joined them in the desert, mostly men but also a handful of women. Religious seekers also began going to the desert seeking advice and counsel from the early Desert Fathers. By the time of Anthony's death, there were so many men and women living in the desert that it was described as "a city" by Anthony's biographer.[1]

The Desert Fathers advocated three main approaches to monasticism. One was the

austere life of the hermit, as practiced by Anthony and his followers in lower Egypt. Another was the cenobitic life, communities of monks and nuns in Upper Egypt formed by Pachomius the Great. The third was begun by Saint Amun as a semi-hermitic lifestyle seen primarily in Nitria, Kellia, and Scetis west of the Nile. The latter were small groups (two to six) of monks and nuns with a common spiritual elder—these separate groups would join in larger gatherings to worship on Saturdays and Sundays. This third form of monasticism was responsible for most of the sayings that were compiled as the Sayings of the Desert Fathers.[1]

Development of monastic communities

See also: Pachomian monasteries

Icon of Pachomius

The small communities founded by the Desert Fathers were the beginning of Christian monasticism. Initially Anthony and others lived as hermits, sometimes forming groups of two or three. Small informal communities began developing, until the monk Pachomius, seeing the need for a more formal structure, established a monastery with rules and organization. His regulations included discipline, obedience, manual labour, silence, fasting, and long periods of prayer—some historians view the rules as being inspired by Pachomius' experiences as a Roman soldier.[8]

The first fully organized monastery with Pachomius included men and women living in separate quarters, up to three in a room. They supported themselves by weaving cloth and baskets, along with other tasks. Each new monk or nun had a three-year probationary period, concluding with admittance in full standing to the monastery. All property was held communally, meals were eaten together and in silence, twice a week they fasted, and they wore simple peasant clothing with a hood. Several times a day they came together for prayer and readings, and each person was expected to spend time alone meditating on the scriptures. Programs were created for educating those who came to the monastery unable to read.[9]

Pachomius also formalized the establishment of an abba (father) or amma (mother) in charge of the spiritual welfare of their monks and nuns, with the implication that those joining the monastery were also joining a new family. Members also formed smaller groups, with different tasks in the community and the responsibility of looking after each other's welfare. The new approach grew to the point that there were tens of thousands of monks and nuns in these organized communities within decades of Pachomius' death. [9] One of the early pilgrims to the desert was Basil of Caesarea, who took the Rule of Pachomius into the Eastern Church. Basil expanded the idea of community by integrating the monks and nuns into the wider public community, with the monks and nuns under the authority of a bishop and serving the poor and needy.[9]

As more pilgrims began visiting the monks in the desert, influence from the monastic communities began spreading. Latin versions of the original Greek stories and sayings of the Desert Fathers, along with the earliest monastic rules coming out of the desert,

guided the early monastic development in the Byzantine world and eventually in the Western Christian world^[10] and beyond its existing boundaries.^[11] John Cassian played an important role in mediating the influence of the Desert Fathers to the West.^[12] This can be seen, for example, in the Rule of Saint Benedict, in which Benedict of Nursia urged his monks to read the writings of John Cassian on the Desert Fathers. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers was also widely read in the early Benedictine monasteries.^[13]

Notable Desert Fathers and Mothers

Icon of Arsenius the Great, notable Desert Father

Many of the monks and nuns developed a reputation for holiness and wisdom, with the small communities following a particularly holy or wise elder, who was their spiritual father (abba) or mother (amma). The individual Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers are mostly known through The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, which included 1,202 sayings attributed to twenty-seven abbats and three ammas.^[14] The largest number of sayings are attributed to Abba Poemen, Greek for "shepherd". Because of the wide disparity of dates for the sayings attributed to Abba Poemen, some scholars believe that "Poemen" was a generic name for a combination of different unnamed abbats.^[15] Others conclude that the sayings attributed to Abba Poemen are accurate, based on a notable and historical Abba Poemen.^[16] Among the notable Desert Fathers and Mothers with sayings in the book, in addition to Anthony the Great, were Arsenius the Great, Poemen, Macarius of Egypt, Moses the Black, and Syncletica of Alexandria.^[17]

Other notable Desert Fathers include Pachomius, Or of Nitria, and Shenoute. Many individuals spent part of their lives in the Egyptian desert, including Athanasius of Alexandria, Evagrius Ponticus, and Hilarion (later lived as a hermit in the area of Gaza). John Cassian's works brought the wisdom of the Desert Fathers into a wider arena.

Practices

Part of a series on

Christian mysticism

Transfiguration of Jesus

Theology and philosophy

Practices

People (by era or century)

Literature and media

vte

Withdrawal from society

The legalization of Christianity by the Roman Empire in 313 gave Anthony a greater resolve to go out into the desert. Nostalgic for the tradition of martyrdom, he saw withdrawal and asceticism as an alternative. He insisted on selling all his material possessions—he left his younger sister a small amount of money to live her life in a convent, and donated the rest to the poor.^[7] When members of the church began finding ways to work with the Roman state, the Desert Fathers saw that as a

compromise between "the things of God and the things of Caesar." The monastic communities were essentially an alternate Christian society.[6] The hermits doubted that religion and politics could ever produce a truly Christian society. For them, the only Christian society was spiritual and not mundane.[18]

Hesychasm

Hesychasm (from the Greek for "stillness, rest, quiet, silence") [19] is a mystical tradition and movement that originated with the Desert Fathers and was central to their practice of prayer.[20] Hesychasm for the Desert Fathers was primarily the practice of "interior silence and continual prayer." It did not become a formal movement of specific practices until the fourteenth century Byzantine meditative prayer techniques, when it was more closely identified with the Prayer of the Heart, or "Jesus Prayer".[21] The prayer's origin is also traced back to the Desert Fathers—the Prayer of the Heart was found inscribed in the ruins of a cell from that period in the Egyptian desert.[22] The earliest written reference to the practice of the Prayer of the Heart may be in a discourse collected in the Philokalia on Abba Philimon, a Desert Father.[23] Hesychast prayer was a meditative practice that was traditionally done in silence and with eyes closed—"empty of mental pictures" and visual concepts, but with the intense consciousness of God's presence. [24]

The words hesychast and hesychia were frequently used in 4th and 5th century writings of Desert Fathers such as Macarius of Egypt, Evagrius Ponticus, and Gregory of Nyssa. [25] The title hesychast was used in early times synonymously with hermit, as compared to a cenobite who lived in community.[26] Hesychasm can refer to inner or outer stillness, though in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers it referred to inner tranquility.[27]

Charity and forgiveness

The Desert Fathers gave a great deal of emphasis to living and practicing the teachings of Jesus, much more than theoretical knowledge. Their efforts to live the commandments were not seen as being easy—many of the stories from that time recount the struggle to overcome negative emotions such as anger and judgment of others. Helping a brother monk who was ill or struggling was seen as taking priority over any other consideration. Hermits were frequently seen to break a long fast when hosting visitors, as hospitality and kindness were more important than keeping the ascetic practices that were so dominant in the Desert Fathers' lives.[28]

Recitation of scripture

The lives of the Desert Fathers that were organized into communities included frequent recitation of the scriptures—during the week they chanted psalms while performing manual labour and during the weekends they held liturgies and group services. The monk's experience in the cell occurred in a variety of ways, including meditation on scripture.[29] Group practices were more prominent in the organized communities formed by Pachomius.[9] The purpose of these practices were explained by John Cassian, a Desert Father, who described the goal of psalmody (the outward recitation of scripture) and asceticism as the ascent to deep mystical prayer and mystical

contemplation.[27]

Selected excerpts from The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Main article: Sayings of the Desert Fathers

"A hermit said, 'Take care to be silent. Empty your mind. Attend to your meditation in the fear of God, whether you are resting or at work. If you do this, you will not fear the attacks of the demons.'"

Abba Moses, "Sit in thy cell and thy cell will teach thee all."

"Somebody asked Anthony, 'What shall I do in order to please God?' He replied, 'Do what I tell you, which is this: wherever you go, keep God in mind; whatever you do, follow the example of Holy Scripture; wherever you are, stay there and do not move away in a hurry. If you keep to these guide-lines, you will be saved.'"

"He (Evagrius) also said, 'A monk was told that his father had died. He said to the messenger, 'Do not blaspheme. My Father cannot die.'"

Abbot Pastor, "If someone does evil to you, you should do good to him, so that by your good work you may drive out his malice."

An Elder, "A man who keeps death before his eyes will at all times overcome his cowardliness."

Blessed Macarius said, "This is the truth, if a monk regards contempt as praise, poverty as riches, and hunger as a feast, he will never die."

"It happened that as Abba Arsenius was sitting in his cell that he was harassed by demons. His servants, on their return, stood outside his cell and heard him praying to God in these words, 'O God, do not leave me. I have done nothing good in your sight, but according to your goodness, let me now make a beginning of good.'"

When one desert father told another of his plans to "shut himself into his cell and refuse the face of men, that he might perfect himself," the second monk replied, "Unless thou first amend thy life going to and fro amongst men, thou shall not avail to amend it dwelling alone."

"Abba Anthony said, 'Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first decides what he is going to make of it, a scythe, a sword, or an axe. Even so we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge or we labour in vain.'"

He also said, "Obedience with abstinence gives men power over wild beasts." [30]

"It was said of Abba John the Dwarf, that one day he said to his elder brother, 'I should like to be free of all care, like the angels, who do not work, but ceaselessly offer worship to God.' So he took off his cloak and went away into the desert. After a week he came back to his brother. When he knocked on the door, he heard his brother say, before he opened it 'Who are you?' He said, 'I am John, your brother.' But he replied, 'John has become an angel, and henceforth he is no longer among men.' Then the other begged him saying, 'It is I.' However, his brother did not let him in, but left him there in distress until morning. Then, opening the door, he said to him, 'You are a man and you must once again work in order to eat.' Then John made a prostration before him, saying, 'Forgive me.' [31]

Essential texts

There are many different collections of sayings of the Desert Fathers. The earliest writings were simply ordered by the initial letter of the Abba's name in the order of the

Greek alphabet, resulting in the editors starting with Anthony the Great, Arsenius and Agathon, and concluding with Cheremon, Psenthaisius and Or. These editors were the first to use the word apophthegms (meaning: saying, maxim or aphorism), resulting in this collection being known as Apophthegmata Patrum Alphabetica (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection). This collection contains about a thousand items.[32]

The same editors also recognised a number of anonymous sayings and tales of the Desert Fathers and Mothers that were popularly circulated. This material was gathered into a collection now known as the Anonymous Patrum Apophthegmata (Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers). These sayings were loosely ordered by subject (for instance: humility, charity etc.).

The collection now known as the Systematic Collection began to emerge a century later (c. 500 AD) and features sayings from the Alphabetical Collection and the Anonymous Sayings, combined and systematically ordered under twenty-one chapters. This collection contains about 1200 items and therefore does not completely combine the two older collections.[33]

The various collections of sayings often overlap.

Partial list of traditional texts

Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Apophthegmata Patrum)

The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Anonymous Apophthegmata)[34]

The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers

The Systematic Sayings of the Desert Fathers (also known as the Systematic Collection, The Book of the Elders or the Gerontikon)

Ethiopic Collectio Monastica, which includes many sayings of the Desert Fathers not included in the Apophthegmata Patrum

The Lives of the Desert Fathers (Historia Monachorum in Aegypto)[35][36]

The Paradise of the Desert Fathers (also known as Bustan al-Rohbaan or Garden of the Monks)

The Lausiaca History by Palladius of Galatia

The Vitae Patrum by Jerome

The Evergetinos by Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Macarius of Corinth

The Philokalia by Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Macarius of Corinth

The Conferences and The Institutes by John Cassian

The Life of Anthony by Serapion of Nitria

Life of Antony by Athanasius of Alexandria

The Matericon, collection of sayings of the Desert Mothers

The Asceticon by Isaiah of Scetis

A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret of Cyrhus

The Life of Anthony by Serapion of Thmuis (not to be confused with the Life of Anthony by Athanasius).[37]

Partial list of modern published texts

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Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna. The Ancient Fathers of the desert: Translated narratives from the Evergetinos on passions and perfection in Christ. ISBN 0-916586-78-2

Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna. The Evergetinos: A Complete Text. ISBN 9780911165777.

Arras, Victor (translator). Collectio monastica. ISBN 9042902787.

Beasley-Topliffe, Keith, ed. Seeking a Purer Christian Life: Sayings and Stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. ISBN 0-8358-0902-1.

Budge, Sir E. A. Wallis. Paradise of the Desert Fathers: Volumes 1 & 2. ISBN 9780980517149, 9780980517125.

Cain, Andrew. The Greek Historia Monachorum in Aegypto: Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century. ISBN 0198758251

Carrigan, Henry L. Eternal Wisdom from the Desert: Writings from the Desert Fathers. ISBN 1-55725-283-1.

Chryssavgis, John; Ward, Benedicta. In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. ISBN 0-941532-51-8.

Chryssavgis, John; Penkett, Robert (translators). Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses. ISBN 0879077506.

Cowan, James. Desert Father: In the Desert with Saint Anthony. ISBN 1-59030-145-5.

Gregg, Robert C. Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus. ISBN 0809103095.

Gruen, Anselm. Heaven Begins Within You: Wisdom from the Desert Fathers. ISBN 0-8245-1818-7.

Keller, David G. R. Oasis Of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Luibheid, Colm (translator). John Cassian: Conferences. ISBN 080912694X.

Matarazzo, Jon. Vitae Patrum: The Life Of Abba Antony from the Book of the Vitae Patrum. ISBN 0595290191.

Mayers, Gregory. Listen to the Desert: Secrets of Spiritual Maturity from the Desert Fathers and Mothers. ISBN 0-89243-930-0.

McGuckin, John Anthony. The Book of Mystical Chapters: Meditations on the Soul's Ascent, from the Desert Fathers and Other Early Christian Contemplatives. ISBN 1-59030-007-6.

Merton, Thomas. The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century. ISBN 1-59030-039-4, 0-85969-003-2.

Merton, Thomas. Wisdom of the Desert. ISBN 0-8112-0102-3.

Merton, Thomas. The Wisdom of the Desert. ISBN 0-87773-976-5, 0-86012-276-X, 0-8112-0313-1.

Nomura, Yushi (translation and art); Nouwen, Henri J. M. (introduction). Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers. ISBN 1-57075-371-7.

Nomura, Yushi. Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers. ISBN 0-385-18079-9, 0-385-18078-0.

Palmer, G. E. H; Sherrard, Phillip; Ware, Kallistos (translators). The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain & St. Markarios of

Corinth: Volumes 1-4. ISBN 0571130135, 0571154662, 0571125492, 057119382X.
 Price, R. M (translator). A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret of Cyrrhus. ISBN 0879079886.
 St. Paisius Monastery. Matericon: Instructions of Abba Isaiah to the Honorable Nun Theodora with an Introduction by St. Theophan the Recluse.
 Strohmeier, John, ed. St. Antony of Egypt: The Holy Life and Teachings of the First Desert Father. ISBN 0-9725200-6-6.
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 Waddell, Helen. The Desert Fathers. ISBN 0-375-70019-6.
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 Ward, Benedicta (translator). The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. ISBN 0-87907-959-2.
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 Ward, Benedicta. The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers. ISBN 0-7459-3975-9.
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 Wisdom of the Desert Fathers (1979). Eastern Orthodox Books. ISBN 0-89981-108-6.
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 Wortley, John (translator). The Lausiac History. ISBN 9780879072520.
 Partial list of Desert Fathers
 A partial list of Desert Fathers:[38]

Abraham of Scetis
 Achilles
 Agathon of Scetis
 Aio
 Alonius
 Amoun of Nitria
 Ammonas of Egypt
 Ammonathas
 Andrew
 Anoub
 Anthony the Great
 Apollo the Shepherd
 Appby
 Ares

Arsenius the Great
Basil the Great
Bessarion of Egypt
Benjamin
Biare
Carion the Egyptian
Chaeremon of Nitria
Cronius of Nitria
Cyrus
Daniel of Scetis
Dioscorus
Doulas
Elias the Hermit
Ephrem the Syrian
Epiphanius of Salamis
Eucharistus the Secular
Eudaimon
Eulogius the Priest
Euprepus of Egypt
Euthymius the Great
Evagrius Ponticus
Gelasius of Nilopolis
Gerontias
Gregory the Theologian
Heraclides
Hierax
Hilarion
Hyperechios
Isaac of Nineveh
Isaac of the Cells
Isaac the Theban
Isaiah of Gaza
Ischyrion
Isidore of Pelusium
Isidore of Scetes
James
John Cassian
John of Egypt
John the Cenobite
John the Dwarf
John the Theban
John the Eunuch
Joseph of Panephrisis
Joseph the Theban
Longinus

Lot of Egypt
Lucius the Ascetic
Macarius of Alexandria
Macarius the Great
Moses the Black
Nilus of Sinai
Nonnus
Onuphrius
Or of Nitria
Orsisius
Pachomius the Great
Pambo
Paphnutius of Thebes
Paphnutius the Ascetic
Paul the Great
Paul the Simple
Pior
Pishoy
Pitirim of Porphyry
Philemon of Egypt
Poemen
Serapion of Thmuis
Serapion the Sindonite
Silvanus of Gaza
Sisoës the Great
Spyridon
Theodore of Eleutheropolis[clarification needed]
Theodore of Enaton
Theodore of Pherme
Theodore of Scetis
Theodorus of Tabennese
Theonas
Theophilus the Archbishop
Zachariah the Recluse
Zeno of Gaza

In arts

Painting (with Sassetta,[39] Paolo Uccello in The Tebaid, Hieronymus Bosch in the Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony, and Mathis Grünewald in the Isenheim Altarpiece, to mention only the most famous), literature (with Gustave Flaubert,[40] Anatole France in Le Jongleur de Notre Dame, and Luca Desiato), music (with Paul Hindemith and Ottorino Respighi)[citation needed] have been inspired by their lives, sometimes capturing only the picturesque or folkloristic aspects: the temptations, the little devils, the little monsters that populate the delightful little paintings of apothegms.

See also

Saints portal
Biography portal
icon Christianity portal
History portal
Anchorite
Cappadocian Fathers
Christian monasticism before 451
Christian contemplation § Theoria
Church Fathers
Coptic monasticism
Chronology of early Christian monasticism
Desert Mothers
Early Christianity
Eastern Christian monasticism
Fools for Christ
Isaac the Syrian: The Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian
Lavra, form of desert monasticism from Judaeen Desert
Pachomian monasteries
Sinaites in Serbia
Therapeutae, monastic sect near Alexandria

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Footnotes

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Burton-Christie 1993, pp. 7–9.
Waddell 1957, p. 30.
Matthew 19:21
Chryssavgis 2008, p. 16.
Athanasius 1892.
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